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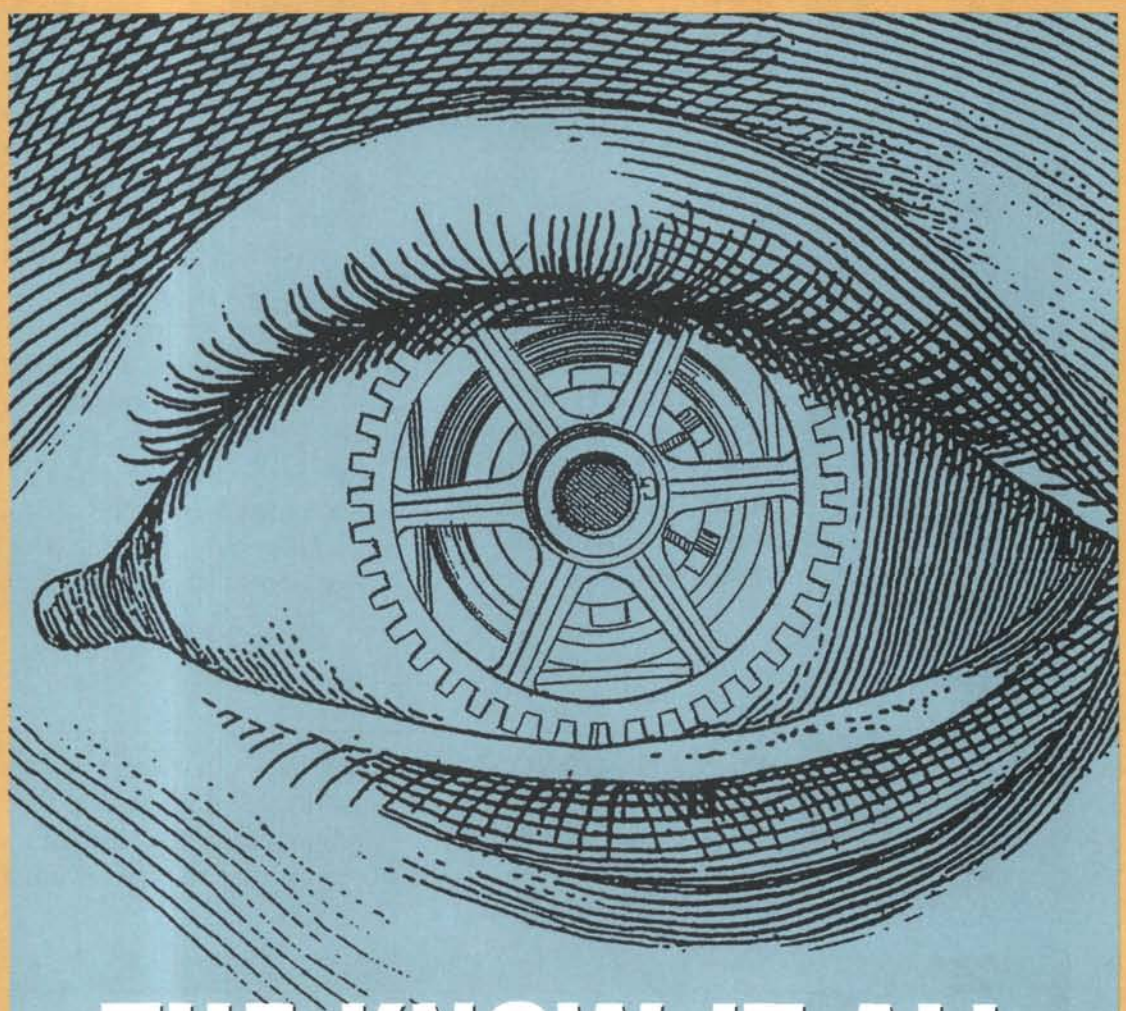

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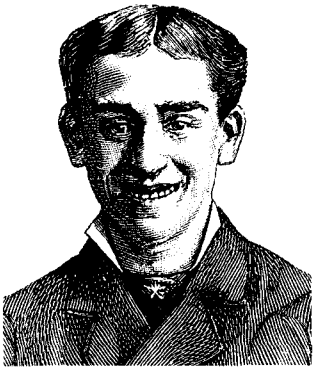

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A mixed language or jargon used in the Levant, consisting largely of Italian words deprived of their inflexions. Also transf. *Any mixed jargon formed as a medium of intercourse between people speaking different languages.*
Fig. *1819, "The Tragi-Comical History of the Lovers of Quimper-Corentin,"* Blackwood's Magazine.
"One day he overheard, in a coffee-house, some Greeks and Jews conversing, in lingua Franca, on a terrible adventure that had just happened in the seraglio: a beautiful European slave, that had been lately brought thither, had made great resistance to the desires of the grand seignor."

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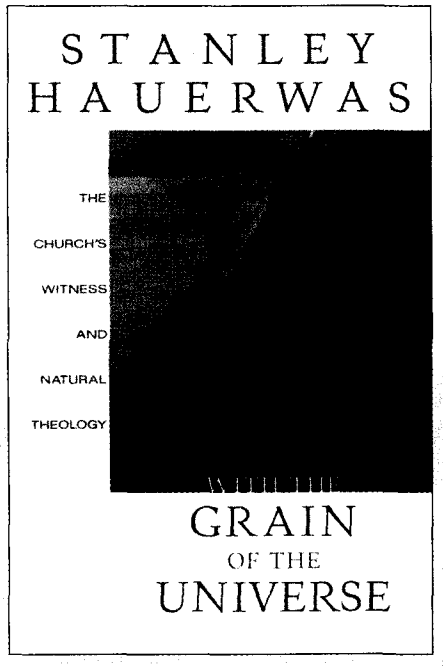

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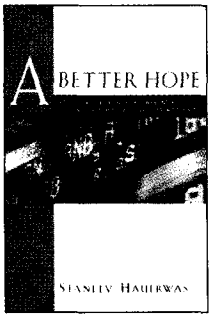

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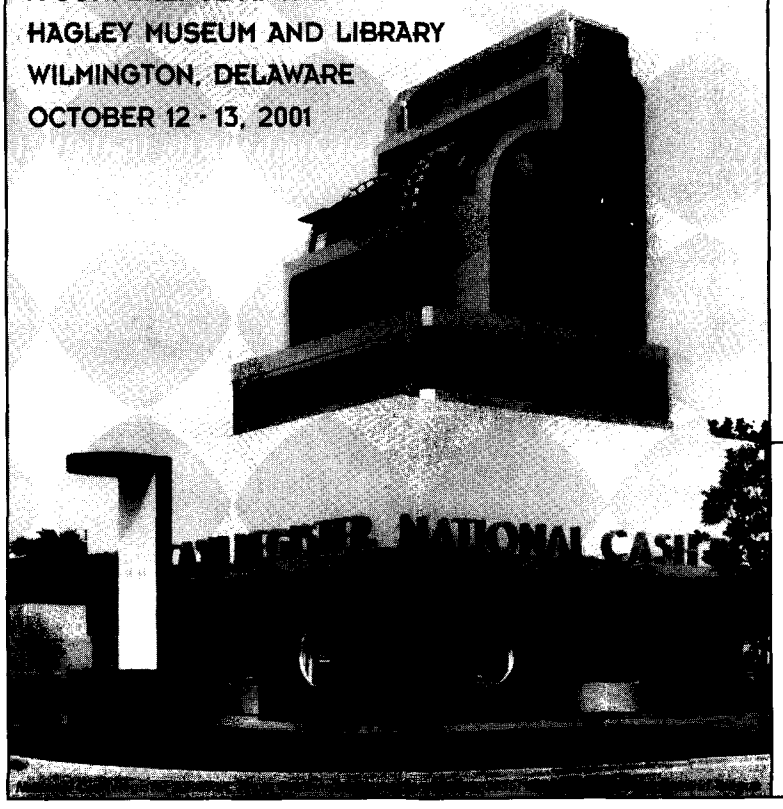

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INSANITY DEFENSE

Oh, for crying out loud. Your tendentious and uncharitable article about Philip K. Dick [Jeet Heer, "Marxist Literary Critics Are Following Me!" May/June] has ruined my morning. In its effort to highlight the "anguish" of a bunch of literary critics, the article has unforgivably danced around the obvious reason for Dick's behavior: For the last ten years of his life, he was as crazy as a jaybird (and he wasn't entirely stable before that). The man lived at his typewriter; when he wasn't writing novels at the speed of light, he was pounding out letters to anybody and everybody (including me), and many of those letters were, well, just plain nuts. Even Ursula LeGuin, who famously wrote a ringing appreciation of Dick in *The New Republic,* eventually stopped answering them. To suggest that the trivial behavior of a sick man was "unethical" and that the man himself was a "traitor" is show-trial jargoneering and just plain cruel. Using the man's pathology to try to turn his letters to the FBI into some sort of Paul de Man thing is beyond the pale, and you guys should know better.

JAMES HYNES
Austin, Texas

Jeet Heer's article on Philip K. Dick's fear of communist conspirators reminded me of an early Dick novel that features an anticommunist angle. Although not considered by critics to be one of his major works, *Eye in the Sky* is a favorite of mine. It deals with the precarious "objectivity" of the world and the ultimate solipsism of people who inhabit inner worlds of religious, political, or aesthetic quirkiness. A subplot involves a nuclear technician who is suspended from his job at a missile-research plant because his left-leaning wife is suspected of being a dangerous communist. The protagonist eventually discovers that his wife has been framed by his best friend and co-worker, who is the real communist agent. Like Richard Condon in *The Manchurian Candidate,* Dick seems to attack both evil communism and McCarthyite hysteria.

THOMAS ROBBINS
Rochester, Minnesota

ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN

With David L. Kirp's recent article on the events that led to the resignation of University of Chicago president Hugo Sonnenschein ["Hurricane Hugo," April], *Lingua Franca* has provided a real and rare service. The article is a valuable reminder that boards of trustees and their CEO members are simply unsuited for the complicated process of selecting a university president.

The gutting of the university began during Hannah Gray's tenure, when the (moneymaking) professional schools, such as law and business, were expanded at the expense of the core arts and science programs and libraries. When the University of Chicago's board of trustees announced the appointment of Sonnenschein, few people on campus believed he could or would be worse than Gray. But Sonnenschein rapidly proved us wrong. If it's true that as an outsider he might not have been expected to understand Chicago's unique intellectual tradition, it is also true that he had a lot of help from people who should have known better. Sonnenschein's ignorance of the university came naturally—after all, he was neither a humanist nor a former student or faculty member. But his provost Geoffrey Stone, among other administrators, must have worked hard to acquire such unknowingness.

HARRY HAROOTUNIAN
Max Palevsky Professor of History Emeritus
University of Chicago

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTIONS

I must clarify a detail in Rick Perlstein's article ["Go North, Young Man," May/June] about the young Americans who immigrated to Canada to avoid serving in the U.S. military during the Vietnam War. Several times, Perlstein refers to these immigrants as "New Canadians" in a way that implies that they, and they alone, were dubbed New Canadians. In fact, the term New Canadians is applied equally to all immigrants to Canada. It puts a different spin on such statements as "the New Canadians worked hard to contribute as citizens" and "a large percentage of Toronto's social workers are New Canadians."

ANDRÉ FOURNIER
Húsavík, Iceland

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LETTERHEADS

THE OP-ED PAGE OF *THE NEW York Times* is a familiar venue for the public intellectual. There, academic mandarins descend from their rarefied chambers to offer eight-hundred-word distillations of their views. It's less well recognized, however, that the *Times* has another arena for intellectuals with an appetite for the public eye—a forum that requires an even greater talent for pithiness. It's just a few inches, a turn of the head, to the left: the letters page.

Although Alan Wolfe and Kathleen Hall Jamieson may be better known to the Op-Ed editors, Felicia Ackerman, a professor of philosophy at Brown University, *owns* the *Times* letters page. Since 1991, the *Times* has published seventy-four of her epistles, including six so far this year. And were it not for the *Times*'s notorious stringency, readers would see far more of Ackerman: She estimates that for every letter that runs, she's written three or four others. That comes to at least a couple of hundred letters to the editor of America's newspaper of record—to say nothing of the missives she's published in the *Utne Reader, The American Prospect, The New Republic,* and *Lingua Franca,* among other places.

Critics of twentieth-century analytic philosophy portray the field as hermetic and self-regarding. But who better than an analytic philosopher to expose the contradictions and weaknesses embedded in the daily news? A typical Ackerman letter appeared in the April 29, 2001, *New York Times Magazine,* in response to an article called "How to Be Popular." The piece included an anecdote about a junior-high society queen who deigned to give comfort to a victim of bullies. Ackerman wrote: "Tory's act of taking the victim's hand and walking him 'to the nurse and then the guidance counselor' illustrates our tendency to see all problems as psychological ones. It is insulting to take the victim of bullies to a guidance counselor, as if he were the one who needed to change."

PHILOSOPHER, ESSAYIST, AND LETTER WRITER FELICIA ACKERMAN

On March 18, Ackerman criticized a piece in the Travel section. The reporter had waxed nostalgic for Samoa, where she'd lived as a child, and rued the changes she had seen there on a recent visit. If the author "longed for 'simple childhood pleasures like McDonald's'" when she herself lived there, Ackerman demanded, "why does she begrudge Samoan children the pleasure they will get when McDonald's comes to Samoa? And why does she consider it a 'downside,' instead of a sign of wonderful progress, that 'the islanders seem to take a certain comfort level for granted'"?

Certain subjects almost always get Ackerman's blood boiling: corporate invasions of privacy, activists who want sitcom characters to be "role models" ("Eek! Eek!" she exclaims when a reporter uses that phrase while interviewing her), and—absolutely above all—anyone who thinks high-tech health care for the elderly is dehumanizing. A few years ago, when the *Times* writer Vicki Goldberg sang the praises of hospices, Ackerman retorted: "Being, as Ms. Goldberg put it, 'locked in the cold, metallic embrace' of a life-sustaining machine, like a ventilator, is just as compatible with being 'wrapped in the love of family' as is writing articles with the aid of a cold, metallic word processor."

Although an against-the-grain, anti-P.C. strain gives some of her letters a neoconservative flavor, Ackerman is a solid lefty.

FELICIA ACKERMAN

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She simply prefers, she says, to comment on subjects that she thinks no one else will write letters about. As crunchy *Utne Reader* subscribers have discovered, however, there's one area where she doesn't hew to the left-wing party line: "I like the kind of liberalism that is about people, not California condors or whooping cranes," she observes.

As it happens, Ackerman's interest in extra-academic prose is long-standing. She also writes fiction. In fact, her 1988 short story "The Forecasting Game," published in *Commentary,* won Ackerman an O. Henry Prize. As for her strictly academic work, she is trained as a philosopher of language—formerly writing papers pointing out flaws in the ordinary-language wing of that subfield. She now writes about medical ethics, particularly end-of-life issues, and also about the fifteenth-century English poet Sir Thomas Malory, who is something of an obsession for her. (She has been known to end conversations and personal letters with a phrase from Malory's *Morte Darthur:* "Have ye no drede.")

As prolific as she is, Ackerman is not likely to challenge the epistolary record of Louis J. Herman, a retired United Nations translator who published 123 letters in the *Times* from the time he left his job in 1987 until his death in 1996. (He submitted 859.) In recent years, *Times* policy has limited readers to one item on the main letters page every two months.

Ackerman does, however, have one rival to the throne of top academic letter writer: Norman F. Cantor, the retired New York University historian of the Middle Ages. Cantor's output is less impressive by some measures—fewer letters in the *Times,* a more variable voice—but he is Ackerman's equal in range of subjects and far surpasses her in vitriol. When Lawrence Stone, the distinguished English historian, died in 1999, Cantor published a letter in the *Times Literary Supplement* calling Stone's book *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558–1641* "second-rate R.H. Tawney Marxism" and charging that the historian's work generally was "verbose, disorganized, and often erroneous." When C. Vann Woodward died last year, Cantor did a similar, if slightly less withering, number on him, in the *TLS.*

"I don't have any compulsion about this," protests Cantor, whose book *In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World It Made* (Free Press) hit best-seller lists this year. "I don't turn them out three times a week."

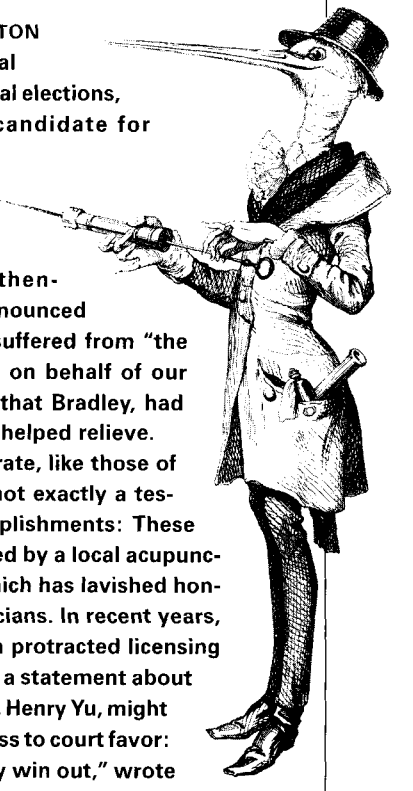
Explaining his motivations, he says: "There are a million copies of my medieval books in print, but I regard myself as a cultural critic as well as a historian. I'm particularly concerned with the training of historians, and who trains them, and how that impacts on the general culture."

Those who rallied to Stone's defense implied or said outright that Cantor was a crank. It's the inevitable charge leveled at a frequent letter writer. Ackerman says it's an unfair one: "Why is it more likely that a person who writes letters to the editor will be called a crank than someone who writes Op-Eds, or short stories, or essays—all of which I've also written?"

CHRISTOPHER SHEA

The philosopher Felicia Ackerman is a familiar presence on the *New York Times* letters page. Since 1991, the *Times* has published seventy-four of her epistles.

PH.D.'S FOR POLS



THE CALIFORNIA CITY OF COMPTON must be the intellectual capital of America. In its June 5 municipal elections, the incumbent mayor, one candidate for city council, and a sitting city council member all unabashedly touted their Ph.D.'s. According to the *Los Angeles Times,* Compton's then-mayor, Omar Bradley, Ph.D., announced in his campaign that the city suffered from "the lack of educational excellence on behalf of our elected officials"—a condition that Bradley, had he been reelected, would have helped relieve.

Except that Bradley's doctorate, like those of the other two local pols, was not exactly a testament to his scholarly accomplishments: These were honorary degrees conferred by a local acupuncture school, Yuin University, which has lavished honorary doctorates on local politicians. In recent years, the school has been locked in a protracted licensing dispute with the state. A look at a statement about that dispute from Yuin's founder, Henry Yu, might explain the university's eagerness to court favor: "The side of right will ultimately win out," wrote Yu last year, "but not until it first successfully defends itself against the venomous serpents with which it has been cast down into the pit of regulatory infamy; not before it must scale the pit's slippery walls out of the darkness of the abyss of evil."

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THE POUND OF FLESH

EARLY IN *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM,* Oberon squeezes magic love juice onto the eyelids of a sleeping Titania. When Titania wakes up, the juice makes her fall madly in love with the first creature she encounters: Bottom, the weaver who has been transformed into an ass. Because Shakespeare's text does not provide an explicit answer, directors who adapt the play often ask themselves what happens next: Does Titania have sex with Bottom?

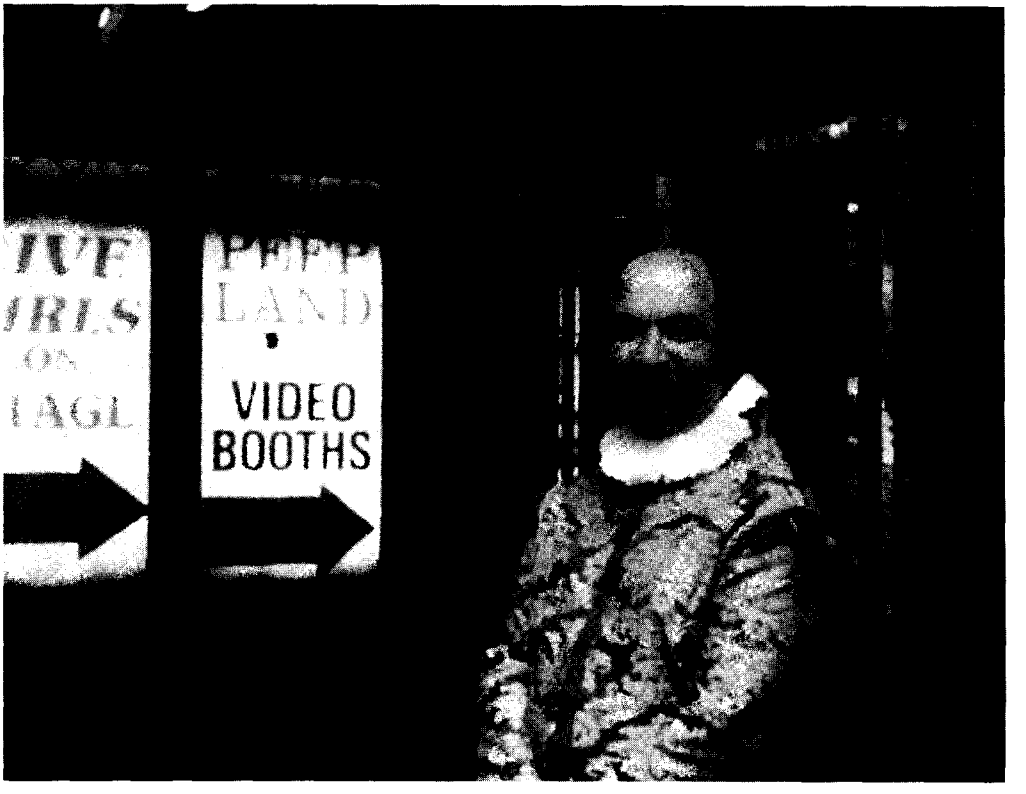
When the director Stuart Canterbury was developing his recent film adaptation, he had no trouble deciding what to do about the Titania-Bottom sex question—they would have sex, lots of it. And Canterbury didn't stop there. Demetrius and Helena would have sex, too. So would Titania and Oberon. So would Lysander and Hermia. And, in an opening scene nowhere to be found in Shakespeare's text, so would five writhing female fairies overseen by a feather-waving Titania.

The film in question is *A Midsummer Night's Cream*—tag line: "What (Horny) Fools These Mortals Be!"—and it's merely one recent example of a growing genre of Shakespeare adaptation: Shakespeare porn. Nominated for ten 2001 Adult Video News Awards, including a best actress nomination for the porn legend Nina Hartley as Titania, Canterbury's film joins *Romeo and Julian* (1993), *Hamlet: For the Love of Ophelia* (1996), *Taming of the Screw* (1997), and dozens of other works in this expanding canon.

Shakespeare scholars of a more traditional sort might dismiss these X-rated adaptations as nothing more than video-store giggle fodder. But Richard Burt, a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, sees a lot more going on here. In *Unspeakable ShaXXXspeares: Queer Theory and American Kiddie Culture* (St. Martin's, 1998) and in a number of articles he has published in recent years, Burt argues that these porn adaptations, along with other "dumbed-down" versions of Shakespeare, can provide insights into not just the plays themselves but also the larger workings of American culture in the post–Cold War world. He says a prime motivating force behind these unorthodox renditions is "a new form of cultural imperialism in which Shakespeare is regarded as a native export, as if the United States could claim anything as its own."

"If you're going to think about Shakespeare adaptations, which is something that I think about," says Burt, "then why not Shakespeare porn? It's one kind of adaptation. It's a phenomenon, it's out there, it's part of the culture, so why not study it?" Burt's project is made easier by the fact that he's an avid porn fan. His Web site, www.naughtyprofessor.com, features a page called "Porn Stars I Have Known" and photos of himself with Nina Hartley and pro-porn feminist Annie Sprinkle. He's even written a screenplay called *Shrew You!*, which he believes is the first lesbian adaptation of *Taming of the Shrew*. And he's not the only scholar studying Shakespeare porn: The April conference of the Shakespeare Association of America in Miami featured a seminar titled "Pornographic Shakespeare." Though most of the participants focused on bawdy elements of the original plays, David Linton, a professor of communication arts and the chair of the humanities division at Marymount Manhattan College, presented a paper about *A Midsummer Night's Cream* and a recent gay-porn version of the same play.

Shakespeare porn varies widely in production quality and in faithfulness to the original texts. Many of the higher-



COURTESY OF TROMA ENTERTAINMENT

A PUBLICITY STILL FOR THE PORN FILM 'TROMEO AND JULIET' (1996)

"By adding Shakespeare to anything, you automatically class it up," says porn star Nina Hartley, who essays the role of Titania in the film *A Midsummer Night's Cream.*

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budget productions seem to be using Shakespeare partly as bait for the female and couples markets. "By adding Shakespeare to anything," says Hartley, who also appeared in the porn director Paul Thomas's *Romeo and Juliet* (1987), "you automatically class it up. Certainly it helps to get you onto cable." A lot of the lower-budget productions use the plays as little more than skeletons on which to hang the flesh of the requisite sex scenes. According to Burt, the earliest known example of Shakespeare porn is *The Secret Sex Lives of Romeo and Juliet*, a soft-core film made in 1968. Not long after, Roman Polanski directed a version of *Macbeth* that was produced by *Playboy* and featured topless witches and a naked, sleepwalking Lady Macbeth. *A Midsummer Night's Cream* is apparently the first porn film to take much of its script from Shakespeare's original text; other films, such as *Taming of the Screw*, contain virtually none of the Bard's language. Still others, such as *Tromeo and Juliet* (1996)—in which Tromeo masturbates to an interactive porn CD-ROM called *As You Lick It* and Juliet calls 1-900-FUL-STAF for phone sex—use the plays as mere jumping-off points. (Burt freely acknowledges the "relative tastelessness and absence of formal complexity" of most of these so-called Shakesploitations.)

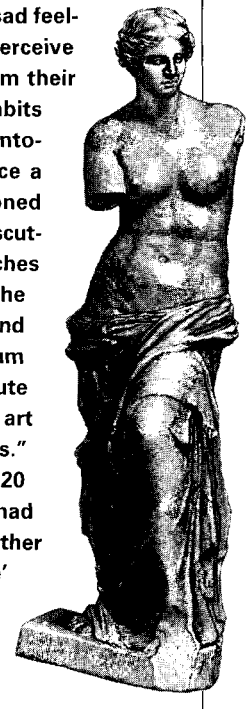
The fast-forward button has long been a handy tool for porn viewers, but Burt is perhaps the first person in history to fast-forward through the sex scenes to get to the dialogue. He did this recently when treating an interviewer to his analyses of *A Midsummer Night's Cream* and *Taming of the Screw*—a contemporary retelling of the play in which the head of a law firm offers his employee Pete (a.k.a. Petruchio) a house in Bel Air, partnership in the firm, and $100,000 if Pete will marry his "bitch" of a daughter, Kate. Though *Taming of the Screw* is badly shot, horribly acted, and relentlessly misogynist, Burt says he finds it much more interesting than the comparatively sophisticated *A Midsummer Night's Cream*, partly because in *Taming* "the sex and the plot are relatively well integrated." (*A Midsummer Night's Cream* is hardly bereft of interpretative élan, however. Hartley says she was particularly impressed that Kyle Stone, the actor who plays Bottom, brayed loudly during his orgasm. This spontaneous bit of artistry received loud applause from the rest of the cast once the cameras stopped rolling. "In our line of work," Hartley says, "actors don't usually get a chance to express themselves like that.")

Amid all the raunchy sex in Shakespeare porn, one person never has any luck with the ladies: Shakespeare himself. The Bard appears as a character in a number of Shakespeare porn films, but, according to Burt, he never once gets any action. (Yes, Burt concedes, Shakespeare has sex in *Shakespeare in Love*, but it isn't explicit.) When asked what this Shakespearean celibacy might mean, Burt says he thinks it has to do with "some relation between Shakespeare and the sacred"—some unspoken rule against overt sexualization of the godlike Shakespeare. Allowing Shakespeare to get down and dirty, he says, would be an ultratransgressive act akin to making Bible porn—and that, at least, is one genre the porn industry has yet to develop.

ANDREW HEARST

RESEARCH FILE

TWO PSYCHOLOGISTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA HAVE found that sad workers are "more productive" than happy workers. In a series of experiments intended to study the "effects of experimentally induced happiness versus sadness on work productivity," as a press release put it, the researchers found that unhappy people devote energy to various tasks "in order to distract themselves from their sad feelings." Conversely, happy people tend to perceive work as "something that might detract from their present feelings." ◆ Looking to study the habits of cockroaches, an assistant professor of entomology at Penn State planned to introduce a colony of German roaches into an abandoned house two miles from campus. The plan was scuttled when neighbors complained. "Cockroaches tend to send shivers up people's spines," the professor told the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, "and we don't want to do that." ◆ A survey of museum goers conducted this spring by Rome's Institute of Psychoanalytical Psychiatry revealed that art museums can "stimulate the erotic senses." *The Times* of London reported that at least 20 percent of the two thousand respondents "had been so excited by what they saw that they either had a 'fleeting but intense erotic adventure' with someone they had not met before, or—if already accompanied—had experienced an 'amorous upsurge' involving 'unexpected experimentation.'" ◆ In a recently released study, the former president of the Association for the Study of Dreams asserts that "Republicans are nearly three times as likely as Democrats to experience nightmares when they dream." According to United Press International, the study found that Republicans' nightmares are characterized by "aggression, misfortune, and physical threats" and that Democrats' "kinder, gentler bad dreams" are populated by "familiar settings and friendly characters."



OUT OF FREIBURG, INTO THE FIRE

GIVEN MARTIN HEIDEGGER'S well-known involvement in Nazi politics, it would hardly seem possible to tarnish the philosopher's good name any further. But a new volume of Heidegger's complete works, edited by none other than his son, reveals that Nazi ideology had a deeper hold on Heidegger's thinking than even his critics knew. Not only did Heidegger play a vanguard role in Nazi academic life during his rectorship of Freiburg University in 1933–1934, the volume suggests, but the celebrated author of *Being and*

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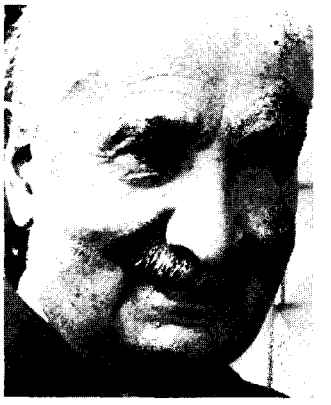
Time was also sympathetic to the Nazi Party's eugenic theories. According to Thomas Sheehan, a philosopher at Stanford, the new material in volume 16 of the official *Heidegger Gesamtausgabe*, or complete works, "could spark a mini earthquake in Heidegger research, showing his dark side to be darker than we thought."

Published in Frankfurt last year, *Speeches and Other Papers From a Life, 1910–1976* documents a Heidegger who complied, at least for a time, with the Nazi racial line. In a letter he wrote on April 13, 1934, then-rector Heidegger addresses the minister of culture, education, and justice in Karlsruhe under the heading "Instruction in Racial Hygiene" (*Unterricht in Rassenhygiene*): "I have been trying for months to discover a suitable person for instruction in this field," Heidegger writes. His aim, as he explains, is "to create a chair in race theory and genetic biology [*Rassenkunde und Erbbiologie*]."

What would such a "suitable person" teach? In a remarkable speech given in August 1933, Heidegger had already presented some of his own ideas about "racial hygiene." Before an audience of medical researchers at Freiburg's Institute for Pathological Anatomy, Heidegger described medicine as a "speculative" science whose definition of health depends on its particular historical and racial context (*Zeit und Volk*). "For the Greeks," he says by example, "'healthy' meant possessing the capacities and strength necessary to conduct business in the state. When someone no longer satisfies the requirements for doing this business, then the doctor, even in the case of 'sickness,' must no longer come."

In the next section of the speech, Heidegger links the Greek concept of health with his own concept of being and with Nazi ideology: "Therefore, a race and an epoch, according to the inner greatness and expanse of its particular being, gives itself the law to define sick and healthy.... The German race is now at the point of rediscovering its actual essence.... Adolf Hitler, our great Führer and Chancellor, has created a new state." The philosophy scholar Ludger Lütkehaus, who first called attention to the controversial material in volume 16, argues that in this speech Heidegger plainly expresses a hope that the Germans will learn from the Greek example to develop their own notions of sickness and health. He also notes that Heidegger employed some sleight of hand to highlight the eugenic aspects of Greek thought: Where Plato once wrote "the doctor should no longer come," Heidegger substitutes "the doctor...must no longer come."



Nazi ideology may have had a deeper hold on Heidegger's thinking than even his harshest critics knew.

MARTIN HEIDEGGER

Heidegger's critics have long argued that the philosopher was seduced by Hitler's promise to renew the German nation and not by the Nazi racism that led to genocide. According to Hugo Ott, a Heidegger scholar and historian emeritus at Freiburg University, the idea of biological racism entering into Heidegger's thinking has never really been considered. Ott says, "There are things here that are quite astounding. They will have to be addressed." And yet the new documents suggest disturbing possibilities.

The biggest surprise is that such questions have been raised on the watch of Heidegger's son. After all, the editor of the entire *Gesamtausgabe* project, Hermann Heidegger, also happens to be his father's fiercely protective literary executor. For years, the younger Heidegger has restricted access to the unpublished materials in his father's archive in Marbach. And he has hardly welcomed critical investigation into his father's life: In response to Ott's 1988 biography of the philosopher, Hermann Heidegger published a review in the right-leaning journal *Heidegger Studies* enumerating "243 places that are scientifically and factually objectionable"; by comparison, a more recent biography by Rüdiger Safranski got off easy with a citation of only 87 errors. Why did Hermann Heidegger now choose to include such compromising documents in an official volume?

In a long editor's note at the end of the collection, Hermann Heidegger explains: "As a historian it is my duty...to clearly show how even a renowned thinker can err politically." Calling the volume as complete as possible a record of Heidegger's official letters and talks, the editor portrays it as "an aid for making one's own judg-

THE FINAL WORD

AFTER EIGHT DECADES OF PERUSING ALL MANNER OF yellowed books and crumbling paper, lexicographers in Scotland have finally completed the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue,* a twelve-volume account of every word of the Scots language known to have been used between the beginning of the twelfth century and the end of the seventeenth. The dictionary's final three volumes will be published before the end of next year by Oxford University Press. Conceived by Sir William Craigie, a Scotsman who was the longtime editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary,* the project has in recent decades received most of its funding from several Scottish universities. (The enterprise was dealt a blow in 1991 with the drowning death of the Australian media mogul Robert Maxwell, who owned the press that had been publishing individual chapters of the dictionary as they were completed.) The wordsmiths are not *quite* done: They're still trying to pin down the meaning of at least one entry, the dictionary's final word: "Zurnbarrie." (As in "For xij pund wecht of fyne Zurnbarrie pulder, the pund viij s.") Some editors are fairly certain the word refers to a place where gunpowder was made, but its meaning may forever remain a mystery.

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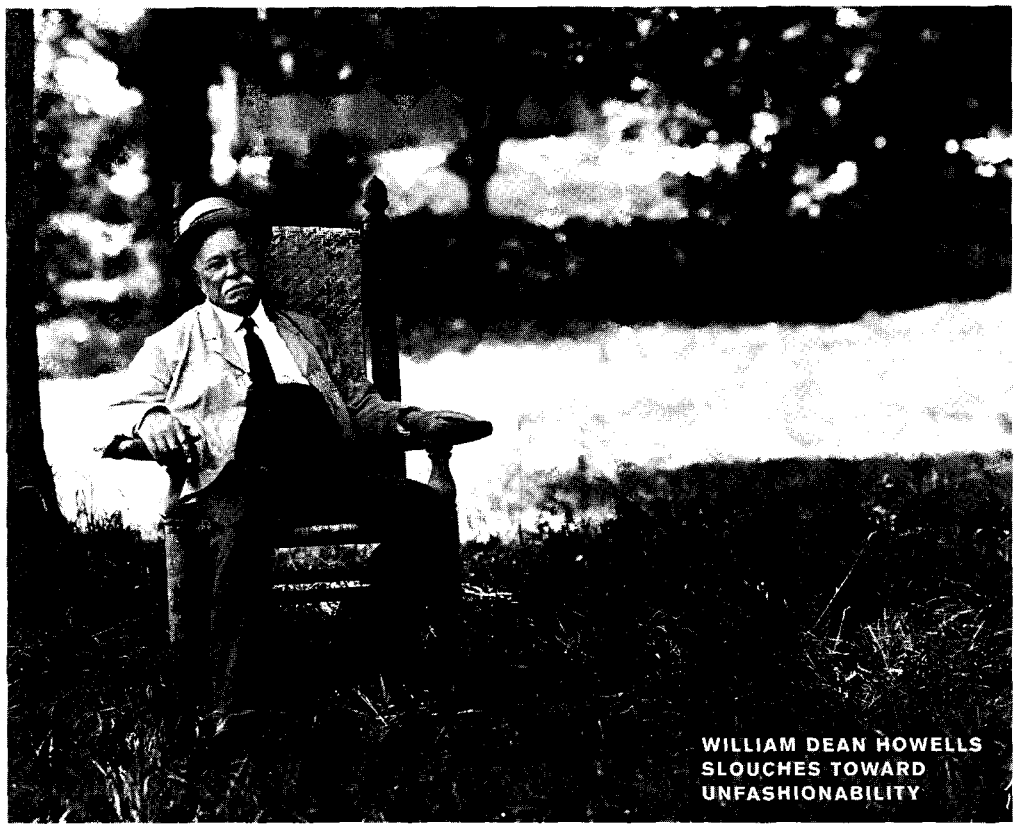
ment about Heidegger's controversial activities in university politics." But he avoids addressing the documents in question, referring instead to later events: "In his lecture courses and seminars between 1934 and 1944"—after his rectorship—"it was clearly recognizable that he was an opponent of National Socialist racial and ideological politics." Theodore Kisiel, a philosophy professor at Northern Illinois University now working on some of the new material in volume 16, also points out that Heidegger had "discreetly but clearly" distanced himself from Nazi racial and biological theories by the late 1930s.

In any event, the relationship between the new material in volume 16 and Heidegger's other activities during the Nazi period remains unclear. Not long after the letter about racial hygiene, he resigned his post as rector to resume teaching, and Freiburg did not, in the end, establish a chair in the subject. Both Kisiel and Ott point out that volume 16 includes only a selection of documents, and they suggest that more revealing information could yet turn up.

Meanwhile, what may be the most complete account of Heidegger's Nazi years remains unpublished. Hartmut Tietjen, a collaborator on the *Gesamtausgabe* who has been granted unusual access to the archives, has been working on such an account for more than a decade. But the work has been put on hold indefinitely to give priority to the *Gesamtausgabe*, which now numbers at least 60 volumes and is scheduled to include 102. Who knows what is still hiding in this philosopher's attic?

HUGH EAKIN



WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS SLOUCHES TOWARD UNFASHIONABILITY

THE BRAHMIN IS BACK

CAN A WRITER REMEMbered for his calm and civic-mindedness hold the same allure for readers as Edgar Allan Poe, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and the other volatile and alienated rebels of American lit? This summer, a small band of scholars and critics met at Harvard University and Kittery Point, Maine, in an effort to break the canon barrier against resoundingly decent men. The occasion was a conference devoted to an unfashionably genial master of the nineteenth-century novel: William Dean Howells.

The journalist Adam Gopnik, who has written admiringly of Howells in *The New Yorker*, and the historians Jackson Lears and Daniel Borus were principal speakers. But members of the William Dean Howells Society in the audience were not surprised when Howells's great-granddaughter, Polly Howells Werthman, began the proceedings by remarking on the strangeness of "growing up hearing about a writer who was revered in the family—and largely unknown to my contemporaries."

Though *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is still sometimes found on high-school reading lists, Howells's descent from literary eminence has been steep. From roughly the 1870s to the early years of the twentieth century, Howells was the nation's main literary tastemaker: He was editor in chief of *The Atlantic Monthly* for ten years, a prolific essayist for the most influential journals of his day, and the author of novels on everything from charlatan preachers to miscegenation. As an adviser to various publishers throughout his writing life, Howells made American literature more cosmopolitan (he helped popularize French, Russian, Italian, and German literature and aesthetics) as well as more realistic in a distinctively American grain.

Perhaps more than any other writer, he also made American letters speak in an appropriate range of voices. Howells was an important mentor to the very different talents of his lifelong friends Henry James and Mark Twain. (Who else could have been an intimate of both?) Yet in his wider project of democratizing American fiction, Howells also stumped for Turgenev and Tolstoy, Ibsen, the Yiddish writer Abraham Cahan, the African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, and an astoundingly catholic list of others.

Those multicultural interests should make Howells a draw at Modern Language Associa-

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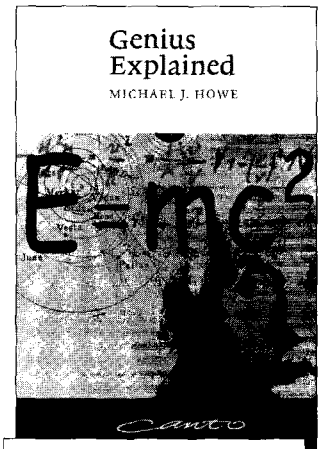
PIQUE YOUR CURIOSITY



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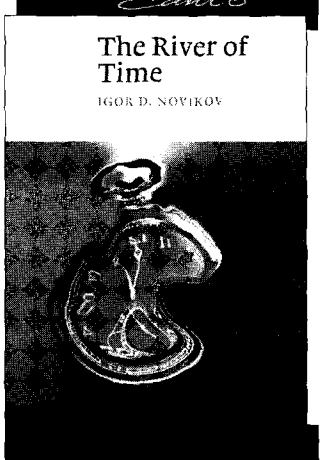

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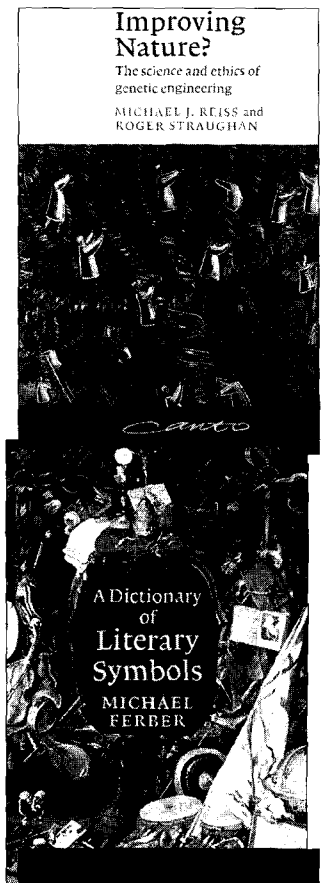

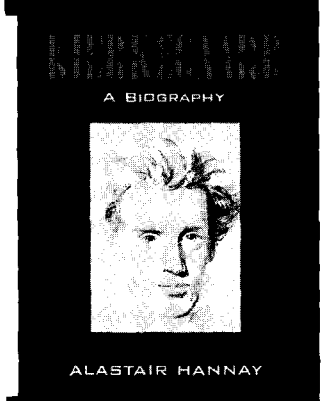

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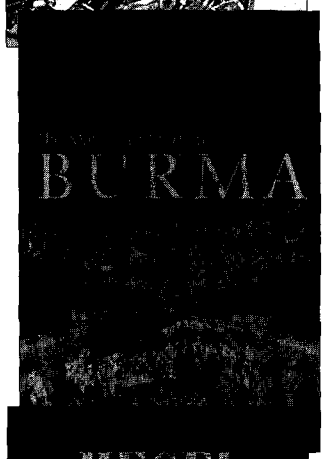

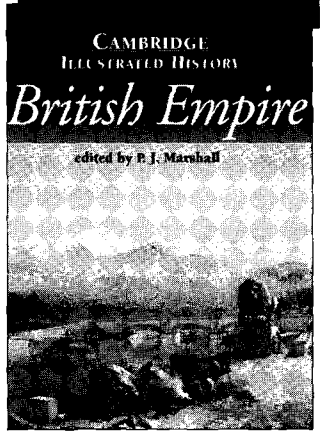

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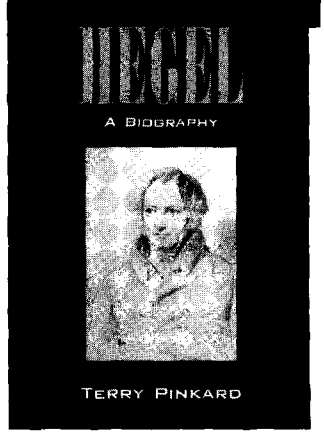

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Can the mild-mannered author William Dean Howells break the canon barrier against resoundingly decent men?

tion conferences, or at least put him on the radar of "most-often-taught" surveys of undergraduate syllabi. But Sarah Daugherty, a professor of English at Wichita State University who served as the first president of the Howells Society, notes that the forty-odd attendees of the Harvard conference "were nearly everyone who has written a book about Howells and a majority of scholars who have published anything about him in the last decades." Nor does Howells have a high profile in the culture at large. There is little chance that Merchant Ivory will mount a plush production of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* anytime soon. (Although Lears did preliminary consulting for an aborted television version of *A Hazard of New Fortunes,* no Howells fiction has ever hit the screen.)

In his talk at the conference, Gopnik sketched a vision of Howells that he finds inspiring—a kind of poetic reporter of the range of city life. He credited Howells with several "original" efforts to write "the big New York novel," including the episodic and panoramic *A Hazard of New Fortunes.* Not only was Howells unimpressed by the New York City elite—"Mrs. Vanderbilt's four hundred"—whose machinations so fascinated Edith Wharton and Henry James, but he saw that "they were important only to themselves." In *Hazard,* Howells exults in the architecture, dress, neighborhoods, and varied social classes of a city too fragmented to be captured by the traditional "novel of social strata." Literary success in Manhattan, Howells felt, was also under the sway of accident. "*A Hazard of New Fortunes* is still the story of the launch of every new magazine—or dot-com—in Manhattan," Gopnik said.

After applauding Howells's acuity about whimsical fortune, we filed decorously onto a bus to the Tavern Club, a picturesque timbered-ceiling retreat in downtown Boston tucked into a restored alley arcade that would cheer any urban preservationist. Howells served as the first president of the club, which was founded to give young writers, scholars, and artists a place for good talk and cheap meals. Courtesy of the Howells Memorial Committee, we were served cocktails before an elegant dinner at a huge communal table.

The next day, Daniel Borus and Jackson Lears spoke at Kittery Point, in a substantial house that Howells's family donated to Harvard. Their setting was an ample room where Howells once wrote looking out over Portsmouth Harbor. (Howells had an old barn moved, attached to the house, and remodeled into a study.) Borus, like Gopnik, emphasized that Howells was more attuned to chance and fun than his sober reputation suggests. Howells's neglected *The Coast of Bohemia* includes the fittingly named Charmian, a character the author recorded delight in creating. She is an artistic poser, a rich young woman who rarely paints but throws fun parties and likes to smoke cigars and pipes on a tiger-skin rug in her atelier. Howells made her more vibrant than the novel's realistic artist—a stand-in for himself—because he was serious but not self-righteous in his beliefs about the ethical purposes of art. Howells was a great debunker of the posing classes, but one charmed that posers liked a dare or a chance. Will his skill in gently deflating pretension endear him to our cynical age?

Lears's presentation answered a regretful no. "Counter to a long tradition of aesthetic blindness in the American left, Howells wanted to see socialism through the eyes of an artist," says Lears, who will shortly succeed Richard Poirier as editor of the literary journal *Raritan.* Howells's inspirations, Lears notes, were Tolstoy, William Morris, and the social impulses that evolved into progressivism and the Social Gospel movement.

According to Lears, if Howells was disturbed about American life in the 1890s, it was in part because chance had come to dominate the fortunes of ordinary people. Panics in the stock market, the superseding of government by our first conglomerates, and even the whims of the literary trade dismayed him. "Howells had lived this version of chance, too," says Lears. "He took risks, but unlike other writers, he denied that the losers got what they deserved." Inspired by the politics of radical Ohio (his father published an anti-slavery newspaper), Howells espoused a Christian socialism that was "in line with the most prescient thinkers of his age," Lears noted. He added that John Maynard Keynes also came to consider a government that left investment in infrastructure to chance to be "gambling."

Appreciating a writer who knew how to enjoy his good fortune but who had the decency to wish to spread it around seems right for our moment. But Lears ended by calling attention to what is untimely in Howells: "Howells the man mistrusted chance and advocated a utopian socialism. Howells the artist thought that without chance and play we'd die of boredom. Today we can't fully understand Howells because he comes from a lost moral universe alien to John Updike and to MTV."

ROBERT E. CLARK

SCREEN TEST

WHO KNEW THAT DURING THE 2000 ELECTION CRISIS AL GORE enjoyed the support of the deceased Cambodian despot Pol Pot, along with a variety of other suspect characters? In a footnote in his new book, *Breaking the Deadlock: The 2000 Election, the Constitution, and the Courts* (Princeton), Judge Richard Posner notes that the "distinguished constitutional theorists" who paid to place a pro-recount petition in *The New York Times* were less than diligent in their claim that 3,488 sympathizers had signed their statement. The signatories' names were available for viewing on a Web site, which Posner scrutinized with considerable care. "Among the signatories listed," he reports, "are Bush Won, Pol Pot, Looneycat Fuckwad, This Is Simply a Farce, Comrade Al Gore, and DIE, pinko scum!" He adds puckishly: "The failure of the organizers to screen the signatories is notable, and the analogy of the inclusion of these phony names to vote fraud irresistible."

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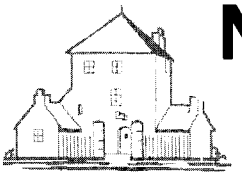

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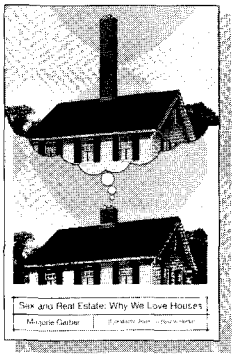

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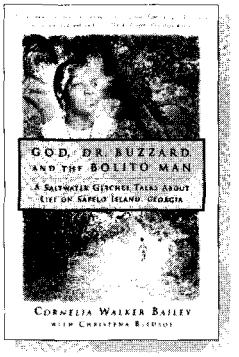

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Equal parts cultural history and memoir, *God, Dr. Buzzard, and the Bolito Man* recounts the traditional way of life of the Geechee of Sapelo Island, a barrier island off the coast of Georgia, whose cultural identity has been largely preserved due to their relative isolation. These stories speak to our deepest notions of family, community, and a connection to one's homeland. The history it preserves of this threatened community is invaluable.

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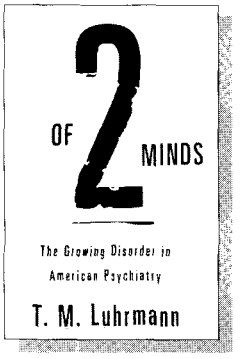

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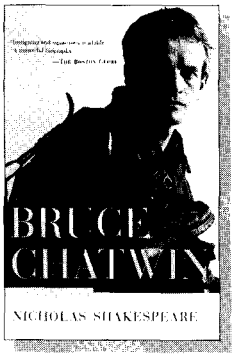

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Breakthrough Books

POLITICAL PARTIES

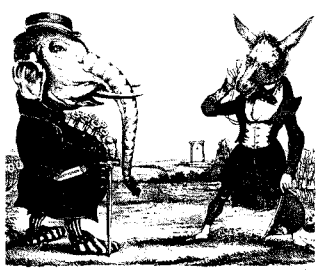
WE ASKED FIVE EXPERTS TO RECOMMEND THE BEST RECENT BOOKS ABOUT U.S. POLITICAL PARTIES.

Michael Kazin, professor of history at Georgetown University and co-author, with Maurice Isserman, of *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (Oxford, 1999).

"Hardly anyone takes politicians seriously when they talk or write about their principles; this is one of the more lamentable developments of our cynical age. In his ***Party Ideologies in America, 1828–1996*** (Cambridge, 1998), **John Gerring** studies party platforms and other campaign tracts to demonstrate how firmly and consistently each party, beginning in the Age of Jackson, adhered to a set of beliefs. He also explains when and why the pols changed their collective minds. Without a whiff of jargon, and with a good deal of wit, Gerring marries the study of 'discourse' to the study of political power. **Lisa McGirr**'s ***Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*** (Princeton, 2001) is the best book yet written about the local insurgencies that dumped liberal Republicanism into the dustbin of history and made the GOP the party of Ronald Reagan and Newt Gingrich. McGirr's tight, but not exclusive, focus on the swelling tide of conservatism in Orange County, California, during and after the 1960s is a model of how to craft a historical monograph. Her book is proof that the history of the right in the modern United States has finally come of age."

Angela D. Dillard, assistant professor of history and politics at New York University's Gallatin School of Individualized Study and author of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner Now? Multicultural Conservatism in America* (NYU, 2001).

"**Michael F. Holt**'s ***The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War*** (Oxford, 1999) contains almost everything anyone could possibly want to know about the twenty-two-year history of the ill-fated Whigs, including the less-than-charmed presidential careers of William Henry Harrison, who died after one month



in office; Zachary Taylor, who died halfway through his first term; and Millard Fillmore, who only seemed dead. Holt focuses on major national and sectional debates, including those over territorial expansion, the proper role of the federal government, and the Compromise of 1850. Perhaps more significant, he also provides a detailed account of the often overlooked impact of state and local caucuses, internal factions, and rival interests. Held together by an aversion to the 'executive despotism' of Andrew Jackson and the unbridled national populism unleashed during his tenure, the Whigs incorporated an ideologically diverse range of adherents—including anti-Masonic elements, Southern defenders of states' rights, and cross-regional supporters of the Bank of the United States. These are the sorts of details that should be the meat and potatoes of an analysis of the Whigs—or any other political party."

Lisa McGirr, assistant professor of history at Harvard University and author of *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, 2001).

"As the last presidential election made very clear, political party competition—how and why particular parties win and lose—depends in no small part on who gets to vote and which votes get to count. In his monumental ***The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*** (Basic Books, 2000), **Alexander Keyssar** reminds us of the fundamental importance of the laws that shape and structure political participation. Keyssar charts the evolution of suffrage over three centuries, debunking the popular conception that democracy in the United States advanced without setbacks or periods of contraction. He also provides abundant evidence of moments when elites, fearing the empowerment of a growing and seemingly menacing working class, sought to shrink the franchise through property and literacy requirements and 'pauper exclusions.' Party politicians, too, often worked to shrink or expand voting rights for partisan purposes. The history of political parties in the United States would be impossible to understand fully without a comprehensive

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history of suffrage. Thanks to Keyssar, we now have one."

Christina Wolbrecht, assistant professor of government at the University of Notre Dame and author of *The Politics of Women's Rights: Parties, Positions, and Change* (Princeton, 2000).

"An exciting recent development is the explosion of work on women and political parties, a long-ignored topic. One of the best books is **Rebecca Edwards's *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics From the Civil War to the Progressive Era*** (Oxford, 1997). Edwards examines the ways in which party appeals in the period before women's enfranchisement relied on themes of manliness and femininity. Family, motherhood, and the home were central symbols in party debate; candidates ridiculed opponents as effete and womanly, while asserting their own strength and masculinity. Edwards's work enhances our understanding of the golden age of American parties and demonstrates that gender was central to the party system even before women had the right to vote. I also recommend **Anna L. Harvey's *Votes Without Leverage: Women in American Electoral Politics, 1920–1970*** (Cambridge, 1998). Harvey addresses the long-standing puzzle of the declining organizational strength and political influence of women in the years after suffrage. Her controversial thesis is that parties used their institutional advantage to incorporate new female voters into the party system before women's interest groups could make the shift from legislative lobbying to voter mobilization. Parties were thus effective at mobilizing, and then neutralizing, women's votes. In the late 1960s, new women's groups finally forced the parties to begin paying attention to women's issues."

Rick Perlstein, author of *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (Hill and Wang, 2001).

"In anthropology, they call it the 'betwixt-and-between': the telling liminal moment when one settled state begins passing into another and the architectures of social structure and social change are laid bare. In political science, the jargon is more simple: It's the 'off-year election.' Two excellent recent studies, **Philip A. Klinkner's *The Losing Parties: Out-Party National Committees, 1956–1993*** (Yale, 1994) and **Andrew E. Busch's *Horses in Midstream: U.S. Midterm Elections and Their Consequences, 1894–1998*** (Pittsburgh, 1999), give the 1958s, the 1962s, and the 1994s of U.S. history their due as social dramas in which, respectively, the forces of Southern Republicanism, Democratic liberalism, and anti-Clinton rage began gearing up to change the country for good. By showing how the most interesting things in politics often happen when most people aren't paying attention, both books succeed in knocking us out of our settled ways of thinking about politics."

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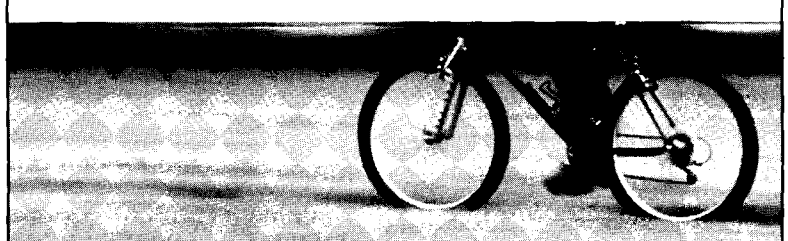

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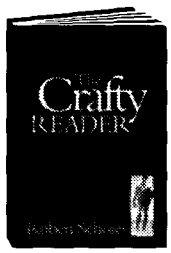

The Crafty Reader

by Robert Scholes

This latest book from the well-known literary critic Robert Scholes presents his thoughtful exploration of the craft of reading. He draws upon and analyzes a wide-ranging selection of texts by figures at the margins of the literary and cultural canon, including Norman Rockwell, Anais Nin and J.K. Rowling. This insightful and probing investigation of the concept of the 'crafty reader' revolutionizes the perception of reading and literary criticism.

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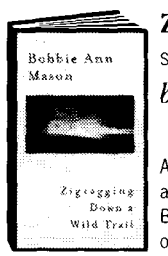

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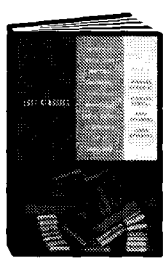

The Lost Classics

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With commentaries from a variety of high profile authors including Margaret Atwood and John Irving, this book eulogizes lost literary works that some considered inspiring classics, but have nonetheless faded into obscurity. If you have ever read and loved a book only to find it has disappeared from the literary realm, this book will provide a decorated group of artists who can sympathize and leave you wishing you had read their forgotten favorites.

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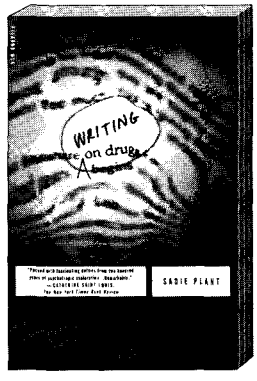

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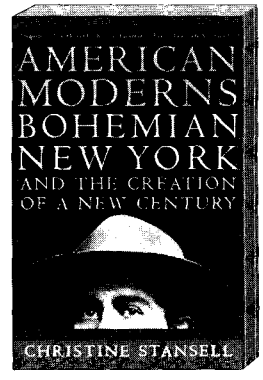
Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century

Christine Stansell



This brilliant work comprehensively examines where, when, how, and why modernity first flourished in America. "Stansell has restored the pre-WWI avant garde to the central place they deserve in the creation of twentieth-century American culture. A fascinating and important contribution."—Eric Foner

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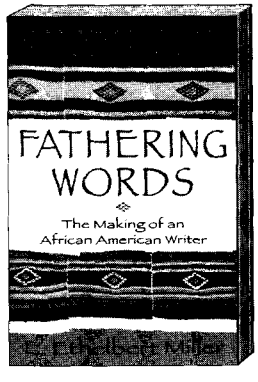
E. Ethelbert Miller



Noted poet and anthologist Miller offers a frank, reflective, and gracefully written autobiography that is both original and universal, a true story of fathers and sons in America. "Modest and sincere . . . a superb document of the Black Arts Movement of the 1970s and the current African American literary scene."—*Publishers Weekly*

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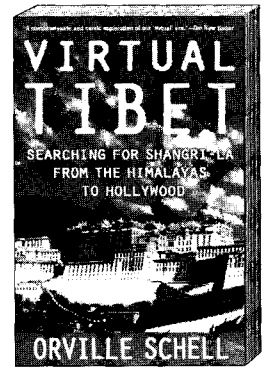

With ample insight and humor, Schell "luxuriates in that uncertain territory where cultures intersect, merge, and implode . . . [and shows] that, in a world where Disney and China negotiate over history, the virtual Tibet is, more than ever, the real Tibet."—Andrew Leonard, *San Francisco Chronicle*

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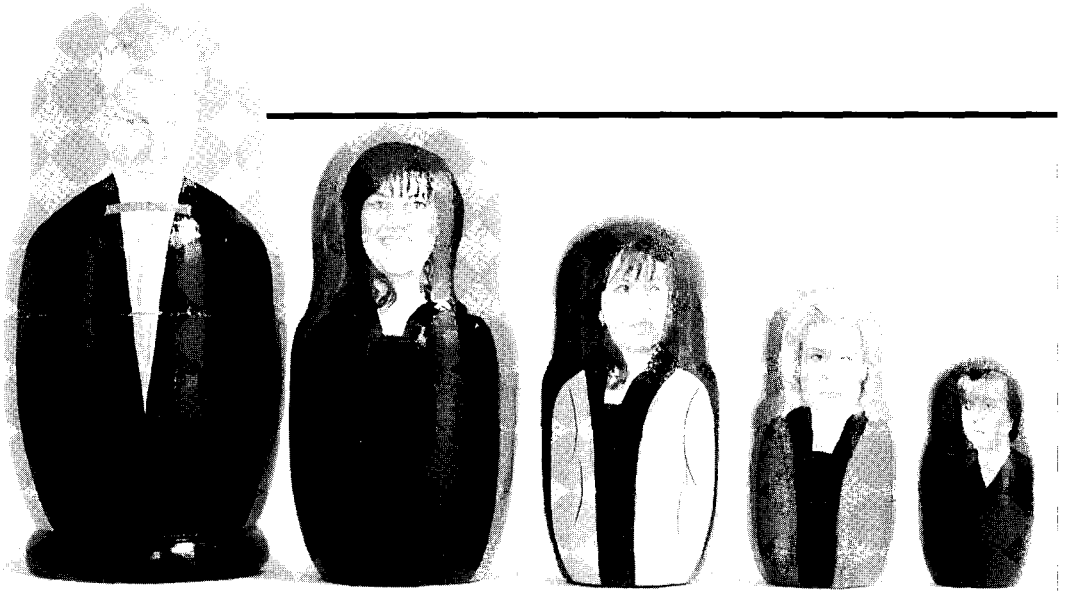

FEAR OF A QUEER PRESIDENT

IN OCTOBER 1998, AS THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES voted to begin impeachment hearings, Toni Morrison announced in the pages of *The New Yorker* that Bill Clinton was our first black president. Or at least, she explained, he was blacker than any actual black person who would ever be elected. By way of evidence, she pointed to his birth into a poor, single-parent household, his penchant for junk food and the saxophone, and the fact that his sexuality served as the basis of his persecution.

Morrison's assertion, it turns out, was just the beginning. "If, as Toni Morrison has argued, there is some truth to the claim that Clinton is our first African American president," writes the queer theorist Tyler Curtain in the new anthology *Our Monica, Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and the National Interest* (NYU), "then I want to pipe up: he's our first queer one as well." Curtain's proof? "[T]he bestowal of a copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* by William Jefferson Clinton on Monica Lewinsky and a rim job by Monica Lewinsky on William Jefferson Clinton. Any queerly enculturated gay man will recognize the acts and the objects."

Our Monica, Ourselves takes its inspiration from earlier anthologies about the Clarence Thomas nomination and the O.J. Simpson case edited by—who else?—Toni Morrison. Whereas those collections featured work by scholars of race, the experts here, fittingly, are students of sex—primarily feminists and queer theorists like Curtain—and the book is published under the aegis of New York University Press's Sexual Cultures series. Indeed, the volume's editors, Lauren Berlant of the University of Chicago and Lisa Duggan of NYU, are queer-theory stars.

"I have a long-standing interest in issues of sexuality and the state," Duggan says. "When [the Clinton] scandal broke, I had already written quite extensively about sex panics, and here we had another one. I became inexplicably obsessed."

Duggan was frustrated by mainstream commentary on the scandal, which, she says, tended to reduce to one of two arguments: "One was a moral denunciation, and the other was a defense of privacy. Liberals were on the privacy side, and on the moral-denunciation side were a range of conservatives." It seemed clear to her that the discussion would be enriched by other perspectives, including queer theory, the academic approach influenced by Michel Foucault that takes existing sexual norms and definitions as fundamentally problematic, not just for those who identify as gay but for all who run afoul of the boundaries of socially acceptable (monogamous, heterosexual, married) sex.

Despite the contributors' shared interests, no fixed queer or feminist position emerges from this collection. Catharine Lumby takes issue with the widespread presumption that Clinton had a right to sexual privacy, arguing that scrutiny of public figures' sex lives is a positive legacy of feminist efforts to politicize behavior once deemed

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A golden age has ended. What can the queer theorists who mused so happily on the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal possibly do with George W. Bush?

private, such as sexual harassment. Because the affair came to light after Clinton lied about it in a sexual harassment suit, its details are "every bit as important as the details of Nixon's attempted cover-up of Watergate."

Jane Gallop's take could not be more different. She argues that conservative forces have co-opted sexual harassment and turned it into a fundamentally antifeminist issue. Indeed, by suggesting that sexuality in the workplace is "bad" and that "good" sex is private, sexual harassment law forces a regression to "a time when the workplace was all male and men were closeted."

Few other pieces in *Our Monica, Ourselves* enter into current debates over sexual harassment law or the like, but what the remaining essays lack in immediate political relevance they make up for in the reach—at times, the very long reach—of their cultural analysis. Simone Weil Davis considers the 1998 porn film *Deep Throat V: The Quest—Slick Willy Rides Again!* Sasha Torres imagines how television news coverage of the scandal might have functioned had Peter Jennings and Judy Woodruff turned to the sex gurus Dan Savage and Susie Bright for commentary. Ann Cvetkovich conducts a close reading of the Starr Report wherein she improbably compares the document to classic slave narratives. (Among other things, Cvetkovich argues, both sorts of text employ "fictional strategies," grapple with ambivalence about making private lives public, and reveal information about the sex lives of powerful men.)

With considerable spirit, Laura Kipnis assesses Linda Tripp's face and the public aversion to it, concluding that though she endorses feminist critiques of lookism, perhaps in Tripp's case repulsion was justified. "Ugliness," she writes, "might be less a physical fact than a social relation, not physiognomic but...intersubjective," and our judgments of ugliness might be a means of "producing social knowledge."

By contrast, James Kincaid, a Victorianist who specializes in analyzing the social anxieties that surround pedophilia, barely manages to stifle a yawn at the affair's "banality." He characterizes the Clinton-Lewinsky spectacle as distinctly unerotic, in part because "neither Monica nor Bill can be easily thought of as children." Since they are not childlike, he explains, "it's hard for us to see them as enticing.... We've seen Shirley Temple and are not going to settle for Monica in pantaloons."

Throughout, strikingly little attention is devoted to the anthology's title character. Only two essays take Monica as their explicit focus (by comparison, two essays are devoted to Clinton's penis alone). In "Moniker," Marjorie Garber studies the implications of Monica's Jewishness, noting, among other things, the parallels between Monica's story and Queen Esther's. A second piece, "Monica Dreyfus," considers Monica within the context of various conspiracy theories, both vast right-wing domestic ones and international ones, and the notion—widespread in the Middle East but little reported in the United States—that Monica was a Zionist pawn.

It is Bill, however, who proves the source of near-universal fascination. Few contributors resist somehow answering Morrison's 1998 claim about Clinton's African-Americanness: Echoing Tyler Curtain's assertion that Clinton is the first queer president, other contributors offer up Bill the feminine, Bill the black woman ("We should get Angela Bassett, or better yet Dr. Vaginal Davis, to play her in the movie," declares Frederick Moten), Bill the white-trash president, and even Bill the sacrificial offering.

Will cultural and queer studies scholars ever find such material in W.? Though Duggan and Berlant report no plans to take him on in the near future—Duggan is working on a book about Jesse Helms, and Berlant is finishing a volume on trauma in liberal culture—they venture a few thoughts. Berlant finds that the contrast between Bill's "all-too-human" appetites and W.'s "recovery from his appetites" to be revealing. Duggan, meanwhile, is struck by W.'s upholding of "normativity," his "upper-class minstrelism of 'populist' politics," and "his infantilism (he's Daddy's boy/Cheney's boy, isn't he?)." Pointing to the Bush administration's exclusion of queers, she finds herself feeling more than a little nostalgic. W. is enough, says Duggan, to make "ole 'don't ask, don't tell' Billy Boy look good."

KATE JULIAN

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING PIOUS

IN THE FIVE YEARS THAT PASSED BETWEEN HIS conviction for "indecent behavior" in 1895 and his death in 1900, Oscar Wilde was the target of more than nine hundred hostile sermons. Because of its association with the unspeakable crime of sodomy, his name remained a byword for moral corruption well into the twentieth century. Then,

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with the emergence of the gay rights movement in the 1960s, a new view of Wilde emerged: He was hailed as a homosexual martyr and icon.

And now, a century after his death, the Irish wit and playwright is finding fans in an unexpected quarter: Conservative Roman Catholics are celebrating Wilde as one of their own, not just because of his controversial deathbed conversion but also because his writings are said to display a deeply Christian sensibility.

In November 2000, the Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica* featured an article by the Reverend Antonio Spadaro, S.J., that sought to "rehabilitate" Wilde in the eyes of the Church by praising the "implicit journey of faith" recorded in such late-life writings as *De Profundis* (1895) and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898). Father Spadaro's arguments have been echoed by lay Catholic writers. Joseph Pearce, a former neo-Nazi who converted to Catholicism, has written a full-length biography, *The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde* (2000), in which he makes a case for Wilde's "latent Christianity." And in the pages of the conservative Catholic magazine *Crisis,* Jeffrey Tucker, general editor at the Ludwig von Mises Institute, has hailed Wilde as a closet Catholic. Tucker writes that "only at the last possible moment did Wilde finally embrace the One [Jesus] who was truly his lifelong lover." (Following the appearance of his article, Tucker received a note from Pat Buchanan, a longtime foe of gay rights; Buchanan agreed that Catholics need to be more forgiving of Wilde.)

Pearce and Tucker contend that Wilde's previous biographers have deliberately downplayed the importance of religion in his life. Tucker criticizes Richard Ellman's 1988 biography for treating the conversion as a "minor detail, perhaps further evidence of the broken man that Wilde had become after his two years in prison for sodomy." He adds: "In a particularly uncomprehending passage, Ellman compares the application of sacred oils to Wilde's hands and feet during the last rite to 'putting a green carnation in his buttonhole.' Thus, Ellman encourages us to overlook Wilde's conversion and not let it spoil our image of him as an icon of the gay lifestyle."

The argument about Wilde's religiosity concerns not just his life but also his literary sensibility. From the time he was an undergraduate at Oxford, Wilde was both fascinated by the Catholic Church and prone to mocking it. Catholicism, he once quipped, "was the only religion to die in." In *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* Lord Henry jauntily observes that "in the Church, they don't think. A bishop keeps on saying at the age of eighty what he was told to say when he was a boy of eighteen, and as a natural consequence he always looks absolutely delightful."

OSCAR WILDE, 1882

For Pearce and Tucker, the key point is that Wilde was not simply an aesthete but a deeply moral writer whose work is imbued with a Christian subtext. Despite its opening admonition that "there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book," *Dorian Gray,* in particular, has often been read as a Christian allegory. In the novel, Gray sells his soul in order to achieve eternal youth and then sinks into depravity. In the end, it is his aging portrait, not his youthful body, that contains his soul. Might Wilde be implying that there is no escaping retribution for one's evil deeds? "Wilde claimed to do art only for art's sake," writes Tucker, "but in practice, he drew stark lines between good and evil, even as he showed how the complexities of sin and redemption evade easy social categorization. We find in his work many people who stumble into small sins that grow larger through their unwillingness to face them." For Pearce, Wilde is "one of the most moral of the Victorian writers."

How sound is the Catholic interpretation of Wilde? The recurrence of religious themes in his work is unmistakable. But previous biographers have had their reasons for downplaying the conversion. During his last days, Wilde was under the care of his Catholic friend Robert Ross, who wavered as to whether to call a priest or not. When Ross affirmed that Catholicism was true, Wilde replied, "No, Robbie. It isn't true." Only when Wilde was on the very verge of death, when he was semiconscious and incapable of speech, did Ross call for a priest. The priest, Father

Was Oscar Wilde a "latent Christian"? One scholar argues that Christ was truly Wilde's "lifelong lover."

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Wilde is "exploited today as some sort of homosexual Hercules," complains Coren, who has claimed Wilde wasn't gay at all.

Cuthbert Dunne, asked Wilde if he wanted to be received into the Church. The mute Wilde held up his hand, possibly in affirmation. In later life, Ross was unsure whether Wilde had in fact converted, and the subject remains controversial.

One difficulty with religious treatments of Wilde is their tendency to treat his sexuality and his faith as mutually exclusive: Either Wilde was a gay icon or he was a poster boy for conversion. The biographer Michael Coren, for example, complained in the *National Post* that "Oscar Wilde is exploited today as some sort of homosexual Hercules." He went on: "In fact Wilde was not really homosexual at all, and only 'used' young men because he had venereal disease and feared infecting his wife. More than that, however, Wilde became a Catholic. The lion of decadence became the lamb of Christianity." (Queried about his claim that Wilde was not "homosexual," Coren allowed that "bisexual" might be an appropriate designation.)

Yet there is reason to believe that Wilde's aestheticism, his attraction to the Catholic Church, and his homosexuality all sprang from a common root: a rejection of the stifling imperatives of Victorian culture. As the Victorianist Frederick S. Roden notes, "During the latter part of the nineteenth century, High Anglicanism, Anglo-Catholicism, and Roman Catholicism were regarded as 'perversions' in many Protestant circles. Roman Catholics and Tractarians were said to bear 'an element of foppery even in dress and manner; a fastidious, maundering, die-away effeminacy, which is mistaken for purity and refinement,' according to Charles Kingsley. Such accusations, by this time, were equated with charges of homosexuality."

In a high-spirited and giggly conversation, Tucker acknowledges that Wilde's homosexuality overlapped with his Catholicism. Catholicism, Tucker believes, is a "fleshy, physical faith" and is therefore more attractive than Protestantism to aesthetes like Wilde. He dismisses Coren's denial of Wilde's gayness as "implausible.... It is unnecessary to advance such a thesis in order to rescue Wilde from his image as a 'homosexual Hercules.'"

For his part, Coren, a former Catholic who now worships at an evangelical Protestant church, expresses uneasiness with Wilde's aestheticism. "The real question is, Was Wilde searching for God, or was he searching for beauty?" Coren asks. Perhaps the last word should go to Tucker, who is a libertarian as well as a Catholic convert. Wilde, he says, "shouldn't be owned by anyone, and that goes for Catholics too."

JEET HEER

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SRI LANKAN SHOWDOWN

IN 1992, THE HARVARD UNIVERSITY ANTHROpologist Stanley Tambiah published *Buddhism Betrayed?*, a pointed analysis of the ongoing civil war in Sri Lanka between the nation's Sinhala (Buddhist) majority and its Tamil (mostly Hindu) minority. According to Tambiah, the divisive politics of Buddhist nationalism had contributed to several decades of systematic discrimination against the Tamil. Sri Lanka's Buddhist government was incensed by this critique and banned the book in 1997.

Tambiah's work on Sri Lanka is now under fire again—only this time he has distinguished company. In the recently released *Anthropologizing Sri Lanka: A Eurocentric Misadventure* (Indiana), the Sri Lankan sociologist Susantha Goonatilake launches a stinging attack on four highly regarded ethnographers of his homeland: Tambiah, Princeton's Gananath Obeyesekere, University College London's Bruce Kapferer, and Oxford's Richard Gombrich. Goonatilake contends that these scholars have produced work that is factually flawed, politically biased, and guilty of a "large-scale distortion of Sri Lankan reality."

A theorist of science, Goonatilake is not a trained anthropologist. But that hasn't stopped him from making rather strong accusations against his fellow Sri Lankans Obeyesekere and Tambiah. By critiquing Sinhala culture from their cozy perches in the West, Goonatilake writes, his countrymen have performed "an intellectual Uncle Tom function, what some African Americans might have derisively called a 'house nigger' function in the global division of knowledge, delivering false overinterpretations for an essentially external audience."

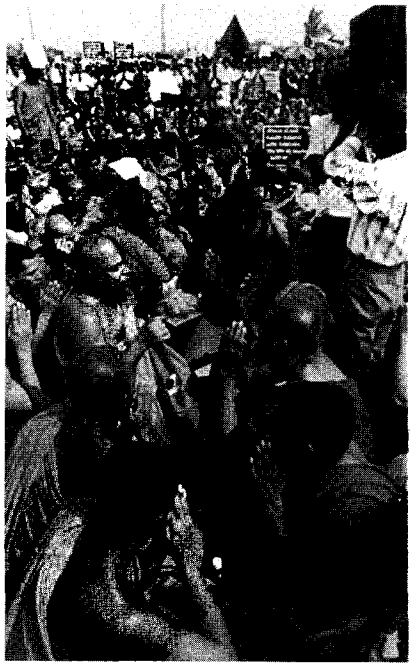
Goonatilake's targets, for their part, are taken aback by what they consider a political polemic masquerading as scholarship. Obeyesekere—who, like Goonatilake, was raised as a Sinhala Buddhist—wonders "how someone with a minimal knowledge of contemporary ethnography managed to get this work published."

Ever since Sri Lanka regained its independence from Britain in the late 1940s, relations between the Sinhala and the Tamil have been strained. Civil war began in 1983, and the last two decades have been plagued by suicide bombings, riots, and intermittent periods of what is effectively martial law. Many anthropologists who study Sri Lanka have argued that the ethnic divisions at the heart of its civil war are a by-product of more than a century of colonial rule. "It's not at all clear," the University of Texas anthropologist James Brow explains, "that ethnicity was the most pertinent social distinction in precolonial Sri Lankan history." In the colonial period, the British often classified Sri Lankans by linguistic group and ethnicity, categories that may have been more relevant to themselves than to the Sri Lankans. More important, when a religion-based ethnic nationalism did develop, it grew hand in hand with efforts to oppose colonial rule. To take a prominent example, the charismatic religious leader Dharmapala, who led the Sri Lankan Buddhist revival in the late nineteenth century, explicitly linked the anticolonial struggle with Buddhist principles.

Obeyesekere and Gombrich's *Buddhism Transformed* (1988)—a book that Goonatilake criticizes extensively—offers a nuanced version of this idea. The authors argue that in the colonial period, Sri Lankan Buddhism assumed "salient characteristics" of Protestantism. Orators like Dharmapala began to emphasize the importance of individual action, "holding that it is the responsibility of every Buddhist both to care for the welfare of Buddhism and to strive himself for salvation." Such exhortations prompted lay Buddhists, who had once deferred to monks on questions of the nation's spiritual welfare, to assume the burden themselves—a development that led to greater mass nationalist sentiment. Obeyesekere and Gombrich ultimately characterize this so-called Protestant Buddhism as "fundamentalist" and note that it adopted a "polemical stance" toward other religions.

For Goonatilake, such arguments are based on a series of factual errors and flawed assumptions that reflect what he calls a "Eurocentric" bias. According to *Anthropologizing Sri Lanka*, ethnographers have wrongly described the turn-of-the-century revival of Buddhism as a mindless imitation of the West, rather than "a self-confident creative act." This error, Goonatilake implies, patronizingly denies agency to the Sinhala.

Goonatilake devotes the vast majority of his book to scrutinizing more minute—but, he believes, telling—errors. When Gombrich and Obeyesekere argue in *Buddhism Transformed* that Sri Lankan interest in astrology, palmistry, and holy men has increased as a result of changes in Buddhism, Goonatilake accuses the two of giving the "impression that there has been a widespread flight to the occult in Sri Lanka" and that Sinhala are irrational. Citing the Buddhist scholar Walpola Rahula, Goonatilake contests Gombrich's translation of the term *dukkha*—which denotes



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

BUDDHIST PRIESTS PROTESTING AGAINST PROPOSED POLITICAL REFORMS, AUGUST 2000

A Sri Lankan sociologist argues that his homeland has been misunderstood by its most prominent ethnographers.

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the first truth of Buddhism—as "suffering," which Goonatilake notes has a negative Western connotation. This mistranslation, he argues, portrays Buddhism as "pessimistic," when in fact Buddhism is, in Rahula's words, "quite opposed to the melancholic, sorrowful, penitent, and gloomy."

Gombrich and Obeyesekere have not yet read *Anthropologizing Sri Lanka* in its entirety, but they have looked at e-mailed excerpts. Neither scholar is impressed. Asked to comment on his translation of *dukkha*, Gombrich claims that Rahula, the Buddhist scholar Goonatilake cites, went through his book "line by line" and "did not object to the terms here in question." Obeyesekere responds to charges that he represents the Sinhala as "irrational" by pointing to other works—including his first book, *Land Tenure in Village Ceylon* (1967)—in which he makes a strong claim for the existence of "practical rationality," as well as a more abstract form of rational thought, in Sri Lankan villages. "In *Buddhism Transformed*," he points out, "we stress the fact that Buddhist doctrines exemplify both those forms of rationality."

Goonatilake has published "thinly disguised hate literature" in a Sri Lankan newspaper, charges one of the anthropologists he criticizes.

"Sri Lanka is a highly politicized culture," Obeyesekere stresses, provocatively suggesting that "it might well be worth asking the political position from which Goonatilake's writing emerges." He points to Goonatilake's recent contributions to *The Island*, an independent but nationalist-leaning Sri Lankan newspaper. In a 1999 *Island* article, for instance, Goonatilake called the Tamil claim to a historical homeland in the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka a "hoax"; in a more recent article, he likens it to Nazi claims to *Lebensraum*. Obeyesekere minces no words, calling Goonatilake's articles "thinly disguised hate literature."

But can *Anthropologizing Sri Lanka* simply be labeled a nationalist polemic and dismissed out of hand? Goonatilake may be a more complex figure than he initially seems. Consider: His 1998 book, *Toward a Global Science*, was praised highly by the feminist theorist of science Sandra Harding. He claims to have aided Tamils during Sri Lanka's 1983 riots and was once suspended from a job for insulting Buddhism. He even publicly spoke out against the ban on Tambiah's *Buddhism Betrayed?*, though he chastised the book for "partial untruths." His own work, he says, was once censored by the government for "being pro-Tamil" ("It was not," he insists).

Obeyesekere, however, is not moved by his attacker's record; he refers to a familiar "Janus-faced posture that some Sri Lankan (and other Third World) intellectuals take in relation to the West: a liberal front in the West and a radical nationalist stance at home." Asked to explain why his work might be called nationalist, Goonatilake responds that *Anthropologizing Sri Lanka* "is a debunking of the existing literature; naturally, it will also cause discomfort for those who have benefited from this tendentious stuff."

JOSH SAUNDERS

THE CONTENT OF OUR CHARACTERS

IT'S EASY TO OVERLOOK THE LOWLY ALPHABET book. But for Patricia Crain, an assistant professor of English at the University of Minnesota, the letter, like the spirit, giveth life. In *The Story of A: The Alphabetization of America From "The New England Primer" to "The Scarlet Letter"* (Stanford), Crain argues that illustrated manuals for learning the ABCs constitute a major—if chronically underestimated—American literary genre. In her telling, the alphabet book stands as an ambiguous protagonist in American cultural history: associated with fond memories of childhood innocence, yet entrusted with the stern task of disciplining the young into the rigors of literacy and adulthood.

In medieval times, European educators put more stress on teaching the arts of speech than on teaching the alphabet. But in the seventeenth century, that began to change. The first European picture book for children was Johann Comenius's *The Visible World* (1658), which implies, in Crain's view, that "learning the alphabet must precede perceiving the world." The book begins with a master speaking to a young charge—"Come, Boy! Learn to be Wise"—and ends with the edified child departing to "read other good books diligently" and to "become learned, wise, and Godly." In Comenius's humanist vision, the alphabet lies at the very center of the natural world. If the "Crow cryeth á á" and the "Chicken peepeth pi pi," then the natural world itself speaks the alphabet, and one must know how to read to understand the world.

By any measure, America's first important alphabet book, *The New England Primer*, was an extraordinary success: As many as six million copies were printed between the late-seventeenth and the mid-nineteenth century. Much of the primer expresses a somber Puritan piety that bears little resemblance to today's "*A* is for apple" formulas: "In Adam's Fall / We Sinned all"; "Job feels the Rod / Yet blesses God"; "Rachel doth mourn / For her first born." Still, other passages are more playful. The couplet "The Cat doth play / And after slay" is illustrated by a fiddle-playing cat and three dancing mice. Readers might have assumed

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that this image was derived from a sign hanging above a tavern called the Cat and Fiddle. As Crain notes, the ABCs acquired to read the Bible could also be used to decipher the less elevated messages of an emerging commercial world.

In the eighteenth century, alphabet books lost their austerity. "From 1750 on," Crain writes, "the alphabet was dressed up and decked out, animated, ornamented, narrated, and consumed." Letters become antic and lively; they begin to "*do* things." In one subgenre that Crain calls "swallow alphabets," letters eat other letters or are eaten by animals and children. In "body alphabets," human beings (usually children) assume the shape of letters, as if under some alphabetizing spell. Bending into the figure of an *X* or a *T*, as an alarmingly limber lad does in one book, looks like fun, though in Crain's view such contortions are no laughing matter—they also indicate the far-reaching power the alphabet holds over us. The child must not only learn his letters but symbolically ingest and *become* them.

The letter, in other words, acts simultaneously as a taskmaster and a playful scamp. And in the recurring figure of the "Zany"—the recalcitrant dunce who always follows hard on the heels of the obedient "Youth"—Crain locates a personification of this double life. The Zany is enjoined to become a tractable Youth by studying himself and learning to read his ABCs. In one image, the Zany ends the alphabet in stocks, punished and shamed for his illiteracy. "Y Was a Youth That had great Discerning"—he sits and makes out the letters of a book; "Z Was a Zany That did not love learning"—he holds the very stick that his master will use to beat him.

This history of the American alphabet ends with a famous literary letter, the red *A* of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter.* Crain believes that Hawthorne's badge of shame has been frequently misinterpreted by critics: Sometimes the letter *A* is just the letter *A*. Drawing on a passage from Hawthorne's journals where the author broods on "letters in the shape of men"—one of those popular "body alphabets"—Crain argues that the novel's unhappy characters, like the twisted alphabetic men, share "the general fate of the literate": Hester, Pearl, and Dimmesdale must all bind themselves to the letter *A*. Thus the novel is an allegory of alphabetization and its discontents. *The Scarlet Letter,* Crain implies, should be categorized as neither novel nor romance but as a very complex instance of that only apparently more straightforward genre: the schoolroom alphabet book.

IVAN KREILKAMP

In the eighteenth century, some letters began to eat other letters.

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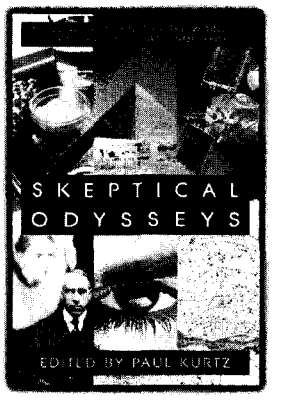

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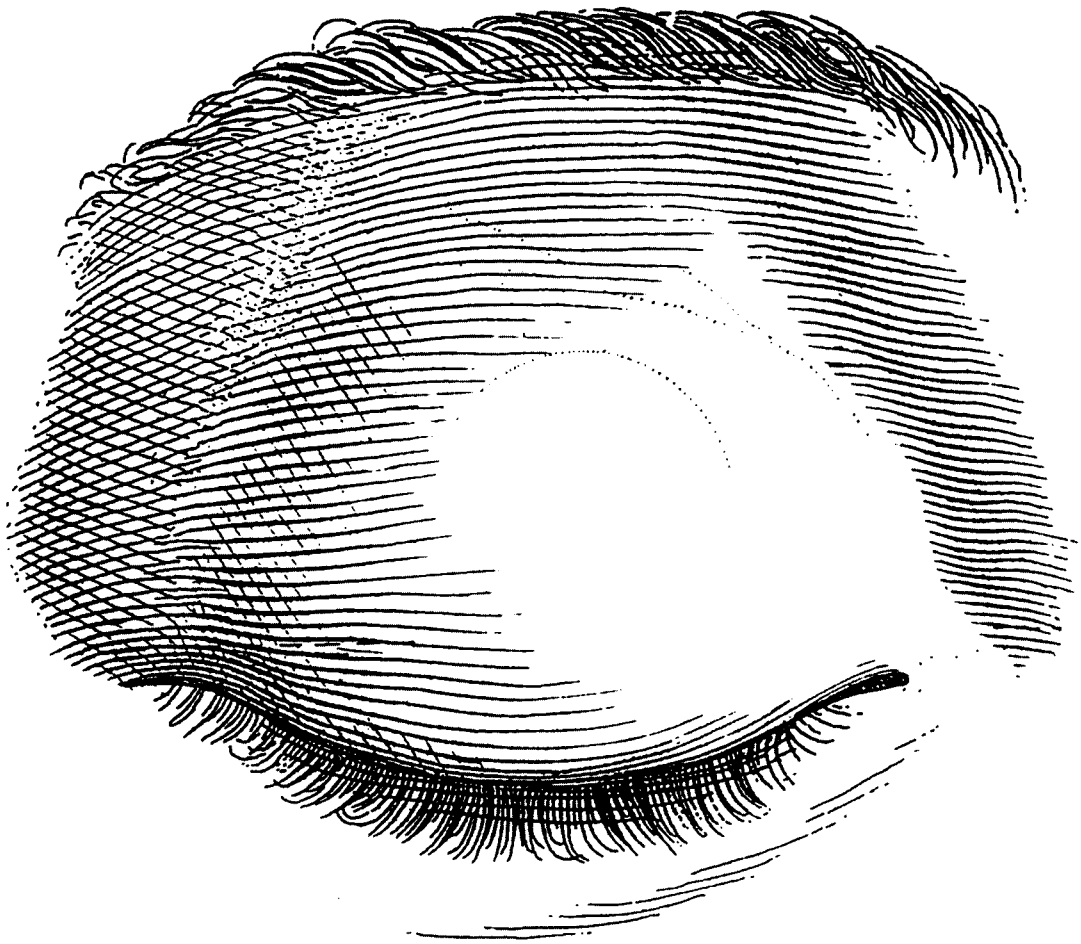

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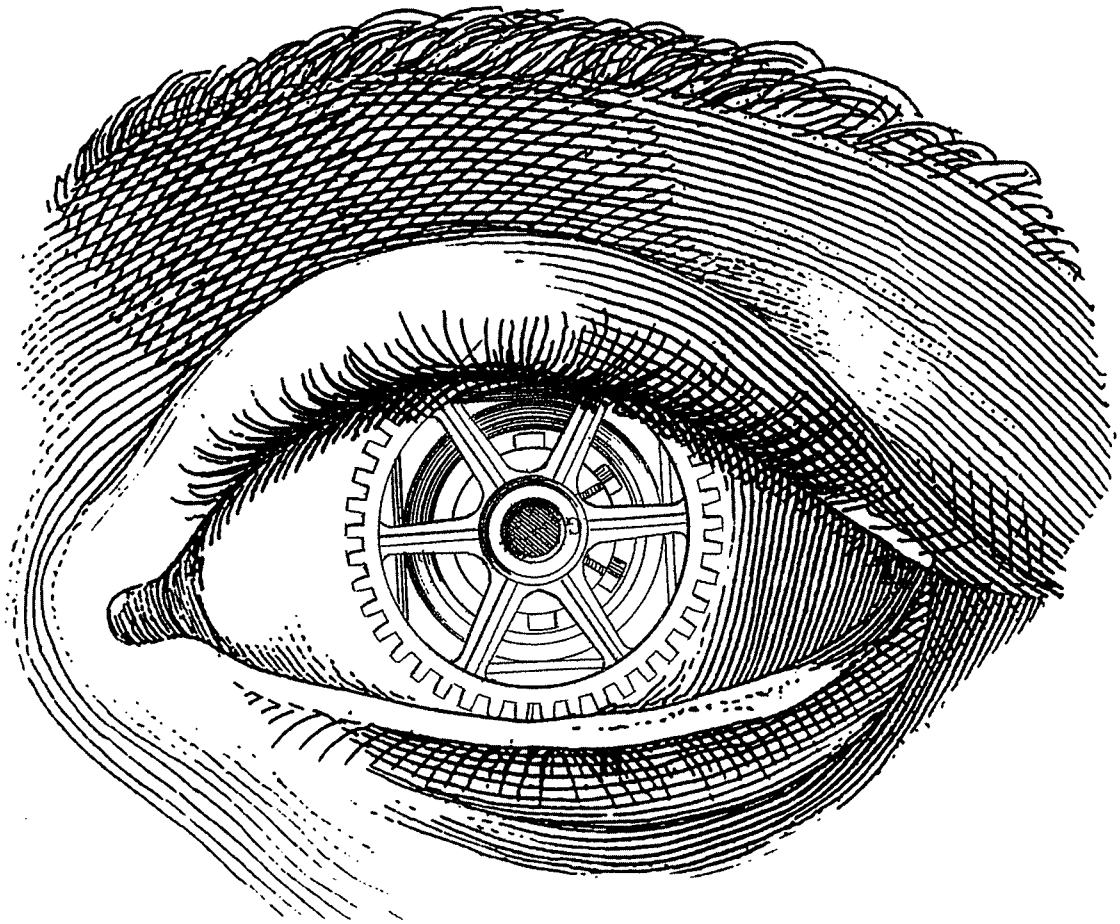

ALL MACHINE

R COMMON SENSE—ONE FACT AT A TIME

BY **CLIVE THOMPSON**

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FLORENCE ROSSIGNOL HAS JUST FINISHED using an on-line travel site to plan a package tour across Europe. The site has prompted her for a few facts about herself: her date of birth, her education and nationality, her occupation. She has typed in that she was born in 1945 and trained as a nurse. She has also volunteered the fact that she is claustrophobic. As far as on-line shopping goes, it looks like an everyday event.

Except this Web site is smart—unusually smart. It has been outfitted with a copy of Cyc (pronounced *sike*), artificial-intelligence software touted for its ability to process information with humanlike common sense.

At one point, Cyc detects a problem: The proposed tour involves taking the Channel Tunnel from London to France; Rossignol is claustrophobic. The Web site notes that Rossignol "may dislike" the Channel Tunnel, and Cyc justifies the assertion with a series of ten related statements, including:

- 31 miles is greater than 50 feet.
- The Channel Tunnel is 31 miles long.
- Florence Rossignol suffers from claustrophobia.
- Any path longer than 50 feet should be considered "long" in a travel context.
- If a long tunnel is a route used by a tour, a claustrophobic person taking the tour might dislike the tunnel.

At the same time, Cyc scours the list of various cities on the tour and takes special notice of Geneva, where one can visit the Red Cross Museum. This time, Cyc's thinking features the following steps:

- The Red Cross Museum is found in Geneva.
- Florence Rossignol is a nurse.
- Nursing is what nurses do.
- The Red Cross Museum (organization) has nursing as its "focus."
- If an organization has a particular type of activity as its "focus," and a person holds a position in which they perform that activity, that person will feel significantly about that organization.

Bingo. The travel site tells Rossignol to make sure she catches the Red Cross Museum in Geneva—but for God's sake, don't take the Channel Tunnel.

Doug Lenat is pleased. Though this impressive display happens to be a promotional demo (Rossignol is a fictitious character), it is, he explains, genuinely representative of his invention's unique abilities. Most computer programs are utterly useless when it comes to everyday reasoning because they don't have very much common sense. They don't know that claustrophobics are terrified of enclosed spaces. They don't know that fifty feet can sometimes be considered a "long" distance. They don't even know something as tautological as "Nursing is what nurses do."

Cyc, however, does know such things—because Lenat has been teaching it about the world one fact at a time for seventeen long years. "We had to kick-start a computer, give it all the things we take for granted," he says. Ever since 1984, the former Stanford professor has been sitting in Cyc's Austin, Texas, headquarters and writing down the platitudes of our "consensus reality"—all the basic facts that we humans know about the world around us: "Water is wet"; "Everyone has a mother"; "When you let go of things they usually fall." Cyc currently has a database of about 1.5 million of these key assertions. Taken together, they are helping Lenat create what he calls the first true artificial intelligence (AI)—a computer that will be able to speak in English, reason about the world, and, most unnerving, learn on its own. Cyc is easily the biggest and most ambitious AI project on the planet, and by the time it's completed, it will probably have consumed Lenat's entire career.

Encoding common sense is so formidable a task that no other AI theorists have ever dared to try anything like it. Most have assumed it isn't even possible. Indeed, with Cyc, Lenat has tweaked the noses of legions of AI researchers who have largely given up on the rather sci-fi-like dream of creating humanlike intelligence and have focused instead on much smaller projects—so-called expert systems that perform very limited intelligent tasks, such as controlling a bank machine or an elevator. "Doug's really one of the only people still trying to slay the AI dragon," says Bill Andersen, a Ph.D. candidate specializing in ontologies (information hierarchies) at the University of Maryland and a former Department of Defense researcher who has used Cyc in several Defense Department experiments.

For all his progress, Lenat still receives mixed responses from much of the academic AI community. Not only does Cyc's highly pragmatic approach fly in the face of much scholarly AI theory, but its successes have taken place at Lenat's Cycorp, which is developing Cyc as a for-profit venture. Incensing his critics, Lenat has published almost no academic papers on Cyc in recent years, raising suspicions that it may have many undisclosed flaws. "We don't really know what's going on inside it, because he doesn't show anyone," complains Doug Skuce, an AI researcher at the University of Ottawa.

Lenat, meanwhile, revels in his bad-boy image. He accuses academic AI experts of being theory-obsessed and unwilling to do the hard work necessary to tackle common sense. "They want it to be easy. There are people who'd rather talk about doing it than actually *do* it," he says, laughing.

Still, some skeptics think Lenat could benefit from more deliberation and less action. "It's kind of crazy," says the Yale computer science professor Drew McDermott about Lenat's ambition. "Philosophers have been debating common sense for years, and they don't even know how it works. Lenat thinks he's going to get common sense going in a computer?" Push Singh, a graduate student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who is building a rival upstart to Cyc, has his own doubts: "Lenat and his team have been going for fifteen years and have only one million rules? They'll *never* get enough knowledge in there at that rate."

Lenat plans to take a huge step toward silencing his critics this fall, when he begins to "open source" Cyc. That is, he intends for the first time to allow people outside of Cycorp to experiment with their own copies of Cyc—and train it in their own commonsense knowledge. Eventually he proposes to let everyone in the world talk to Cyc and teach it new information, to elevate its knowledge to a level of near omniscience. "It'll get to the point where there's no one left for it to talk to," says Lenat, his eyes twinkling mischievously.

But when everyone can speak to Cyc, what exactly will they tell it? Can Cyc—or any AI system, for that matter—truly embody the common knowledge of

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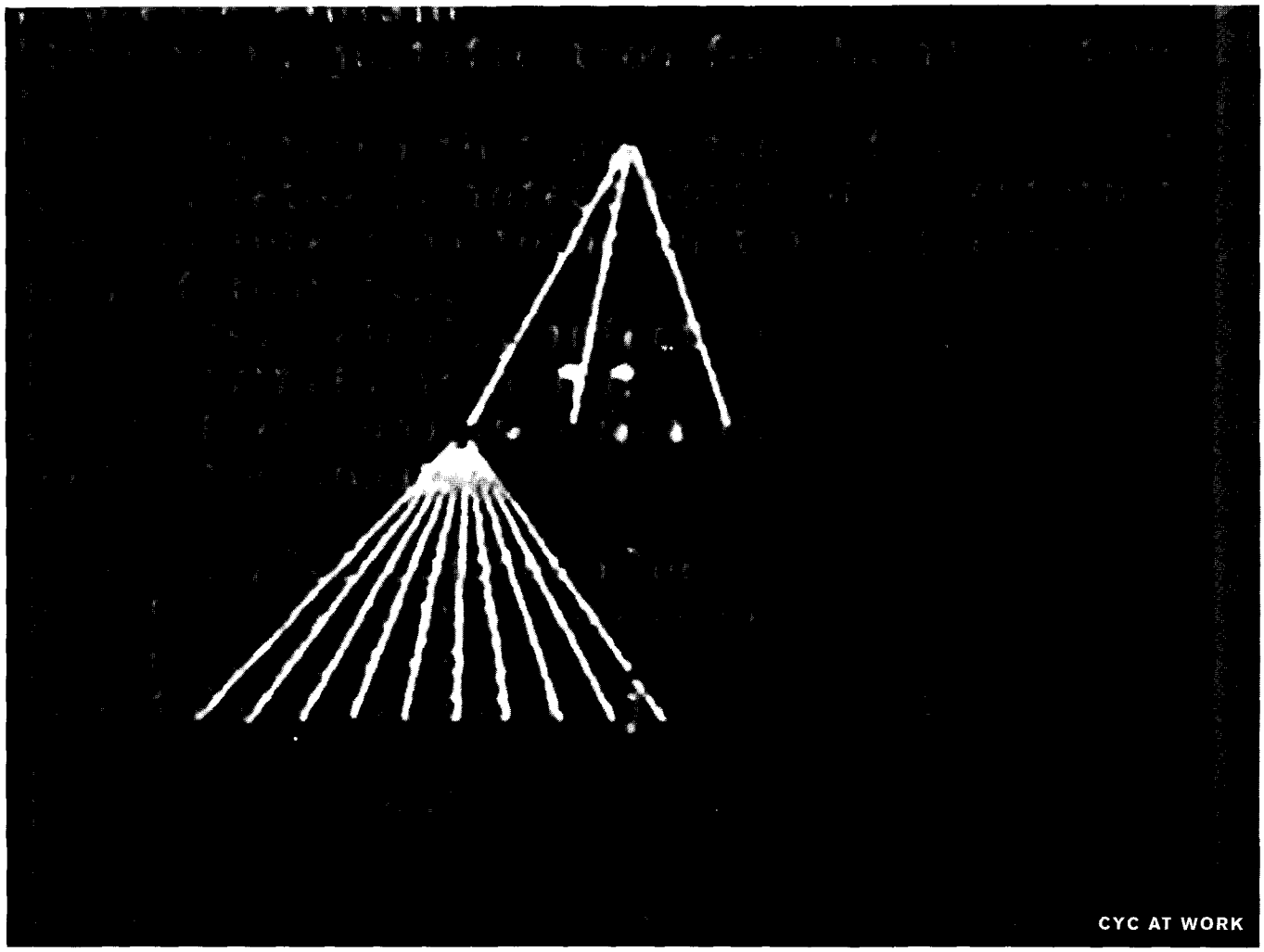

CYC AT WORK

CYC HAS A DATABASE OF 1.5 MILLION COMMONSENSE ASSERTIONS, SUCH AS "WATER IS WET" AND "THE U.S.A. IS A BIG COUNTRY."

humanity, with all its many layers, its contradictions and ambiguities?

SINCE THIS is 2001, Lenat has spent the year fielding jokes about HAL 9000, the fiendishly intelligent computer in Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. On one occasion, when television reporters came to film Cyc, they expected to see a tall, looming structure. But because Cyc doesn't look like much—it's just a database of facts and a collection of supporting software that can fit on a laptop—they were more interested in the company's air conditioner. "It's big and has all these blinking lights," Lenat says with a laugh. "Afterwards, we even put a sign on it saying, CYC 2001, BETTER THAN HAL 9000."

But for all Lenat's joking, HAL is essentially his starting point for describing the challenges facing the creation of commonsense AI. He points to the moment in the film *2001* when HAL is turned on—and its first statement is "Good morning, Dr. Chandra, this is HAL. I'm ready for my first lesson."

The problem, Lenat explains, is that for a computer to formulate sentences, it can't be *starting* to learn. It needs to already possess a huge corpus of basic, everyday knowledge. It needs to know what a morning is; that a morning might be good or bad; that doctors are typically greeted by title and surname; even that we greet anyone at all. "There is just tons of implied knowledge in those two sentences," he says.

This is the obstacle to knowledge acquisition: Intelligence isn't just about how well you can reason; it's also related to what you already know. In fact, the two are interdependent. "The more you know, the more and faster you can learn," Lenat argued in his 1989 book, *Building Large Knowledge-Based Systems*, a sort of midterm report on Cyc. Yet the dismal inverse is also true: "If you don't know very much to begin with, then you can't learn much right away, and what you do learn you probably won't learn quickly."

This fundamental constraint has been one of the most frustrating hindrances in the history of AI. In the 1950s and 1960s, AI experts doing work on neural networks hoped to build self-organizing programs that would start almost from scratch

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and eventually grow to learn generalized knowledge. But by the 1970s, most researchers had concluded that learning was a hopelessly difficult problem, and were beginning to give up on the dream of a truly human, HAL-like program. "A lot of people got very discouraged," admits John McCarthy, a pioneer in early AI. "Many of them just gave up."

Undeterred, Lenat spent eight years of Ph.D. work—and his first few years as a professor at Stanford in the late 1970s and early 1980s—trying to craft programs that would autonomously "discover" new mathematical concepts, among other things. Meanwhile, most of his colleagues turned their attention to creating limited, task-specific systems that were programmed to "know" everything that was relevant to, say, monitoring and regulating elevator movement. But even the best of these expert systems are prone to what AI theorists call "brittleness"—they fail if they encounter unexpected information. In one famous example, an expert system for handling car loans issued a loan to an eighteen-year-old who claimed that he'd had twenty years of job experience. The software hadn't been specifically programmed to check for this type of discrepancy and didn't have the common sense to notice it on its own. "People kept banging their heads against this same brick wall of not having this common sense," Lenat says.

By 1983, however, Lenat had become convinced that commonsense AI was possible—but only if someone were willing to bite the bullet and codify all common knowledge by brute force: sitting down and writing it out, fact by fact by fact. After conferring with MIT's AI maven Marvin Minsky and Apple Computer's high-tech thinker Alan Kay, Lenat estimated the project would take tens of millions of dollars and twenty years to complete.

"All my life, basically," he admits. He'd be middle-aged by the time he could even figure out if he was going to fail. He estimated he had only between a 10 and 20 percent chance of success. "It was just barely doable," he says.

But that slim chance was enough to capture the imagination of Admiral Bobby Inman, a former director of the National Security Agency and head of the Microelectronics and Computer Technology Corporation (MCC), an early high-tech consortium. (Inman became a national figure in 1994 when he withdrew as Bill Clinton's appointee for secretary of defense, alleging a media conspiracy against him.) Inman invited Lenat to work at MCC and develop commonsense AI for the private sector. For Lenat, who had just divorced and whose tenure decision at Stanford had been postponed for a year, the offer was very appealing. He moved immediately to MCC in Austin, Texas, and Cyc was born.

LENAT BEGAN building Cyc by setting himself a seemingly modest challenge. He picked a pair of test sentences that Cyc would eventually have to understand: "Napoleon died in 1821. Wellington was greatly saddened." To comprehend them, Cyc would need to grasp such basic concepts as death, time, warfare, and France, as well as the sometimes counterintuitive aspects of human emotion, such as why Wellington would be saddened by his enemy's demise. Lenat and a few collaborators began writing these concepts down and constructing a huge branching-tree chart to connect them. They produced a gigantic list of axiomatic statements—fundamental assumptions—that described each concept in Cyc's database: its properties, how it interacted with other things. "We took enormous pieces of white paper," Lenat remembers, "and filled walls, maybe 150 feet long by about 8 feet high, with little notes and circles and arrows and whatnot."

Over the next few years, those axioms ballooned in number—eventually including statements as oddly basic as:

- You should carry a glass of water open end up.
- The U.S.A. is a big country.
- When people die, they stay dead.

The axioms aren't written in everyday English, which is too ambiguous and nuanced a language for a computer to understand. Instead, Cyc's "Ontological Engineers"—Lenat's staff of philosophers and programmers, who call themselves Cyclists—express each axiom in CycL, a formal language that Lenat's team devised. Based on the sort of symbolic notation that logicians and philosophers use to formalize claims about the world, CycL looks like this:

```
(forAll ?X
  (implies
    (owns Fred ?X)
    (objectFoundInLocation ?X FredsHouse)))
```

This expression states that if Fred owns any object, ?X, then that object is in Fred's house. In other words, as Cyclists put it, "all Fred's stuff is in his house." (Of course, as with all Cyc's knowledge, this claim becomes useful only in conjunction with other truths that Cyc knows—such as the fact that a person's car or beachfront property is too large to fit in his house.)

Cyc's inventory of the world, however, is only one part of its setup. The other part is its "inference engine," which allows Cyc to deploy its immense store of factual knowledge. This engine includes Cyc's "heuristic layer"—a collection of more than five hundred small modules of software code that perform logical inferences and deductions, as well as other feats of data manipulation. One module, for example, implements traditional *modus ponens* logic: If Cyc knows a fact of the form "If *X*, then *Y*," and Cyc knows "*X*," then it will conclude "*Y*." Other modules have the ability to sort facts by, say, chronological order.

On the one hand, the inference engine is what actually gives Cyc its innate smarts; without it, Cyc wouldn't be able to *do* anything with the information at its disposal. But on the other hand, as Lenat emphasizes, a computer can have state-of-the-art powers of data manipulation and still be worthless from a practical point of view; no machine can help you reason about the real world if it does not have commonsense knowledge to work with. Data manipulation, in Lenat's view, is the comparatively easy part. It's the data themselves that are devilishly difficult.

From the perspective of computing power, commonsense knowledge presents an additional difficulty in its sheer mass. As Cyc's knowledge base grew, the program had to sort through thousands of facts whenever it tried to reason. It began to slow down. "If you're trying to talk about the weather today, you don't want Cyc worrying about whether spiders have eight legs," Lenat explains. So the Cyclists have created "contexts"—clumpings of like-minded facts that help speed up inferencing. If Cyc is told a fact about tour trips to Greece, for example, it begins with

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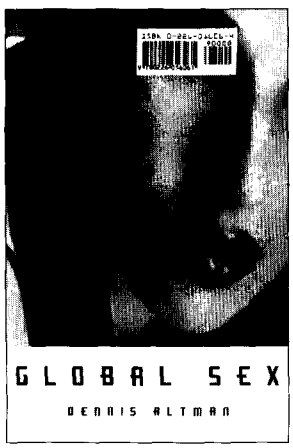

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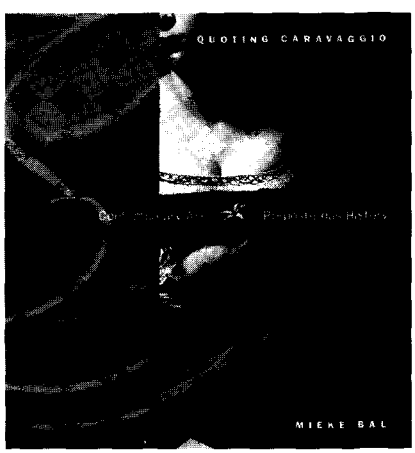

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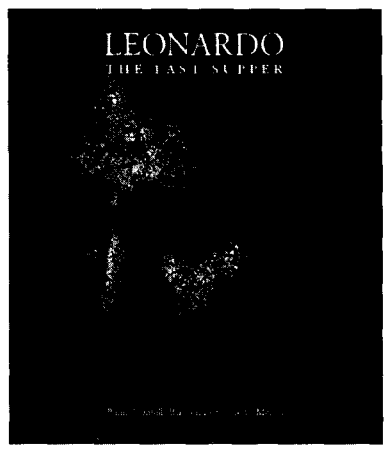

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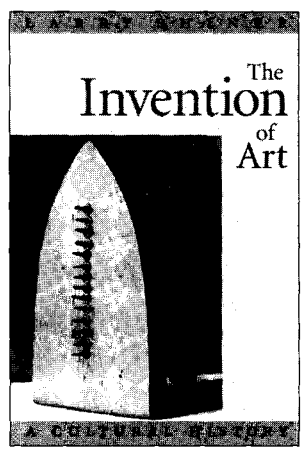

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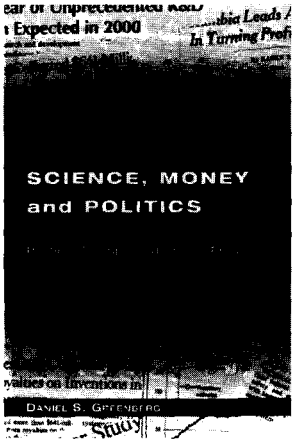

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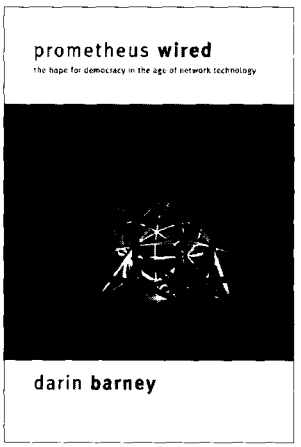

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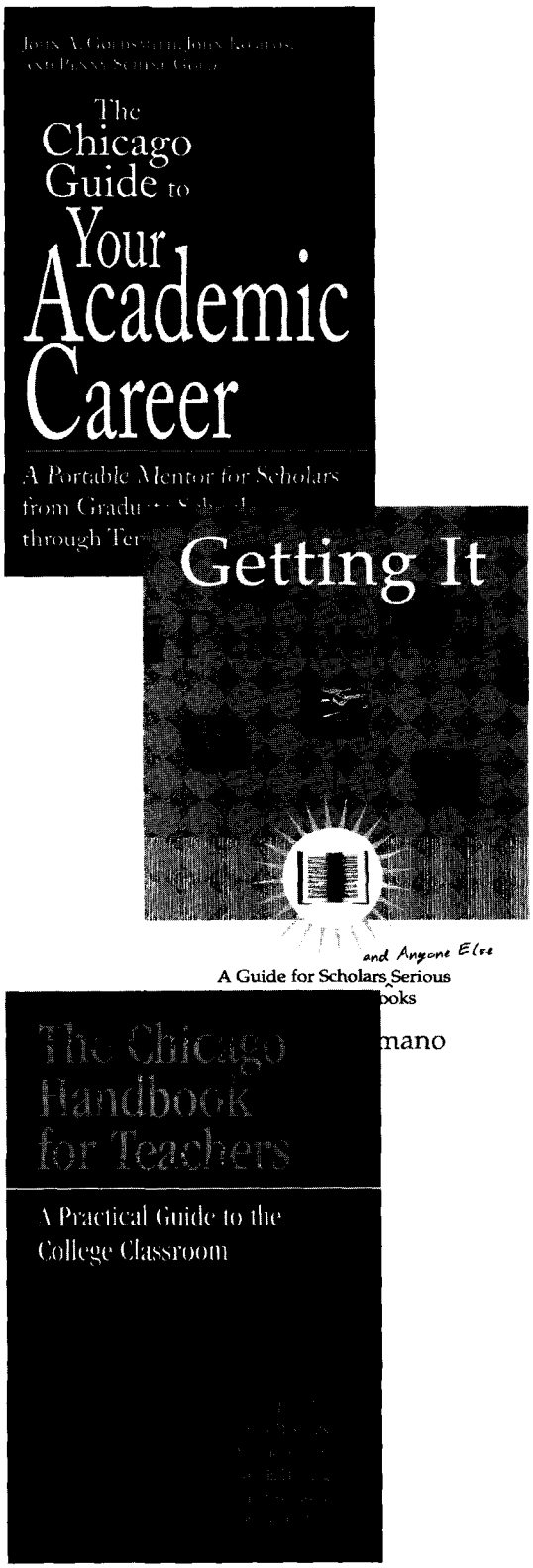
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its existing knowledge about Europe, travel, trains, and the like. In this sense, Cyc's processing strategies are akin to human cognition; we can discuss any given topic only by ignoring "99.999 per cent of our knowledge," as Lenat has written.

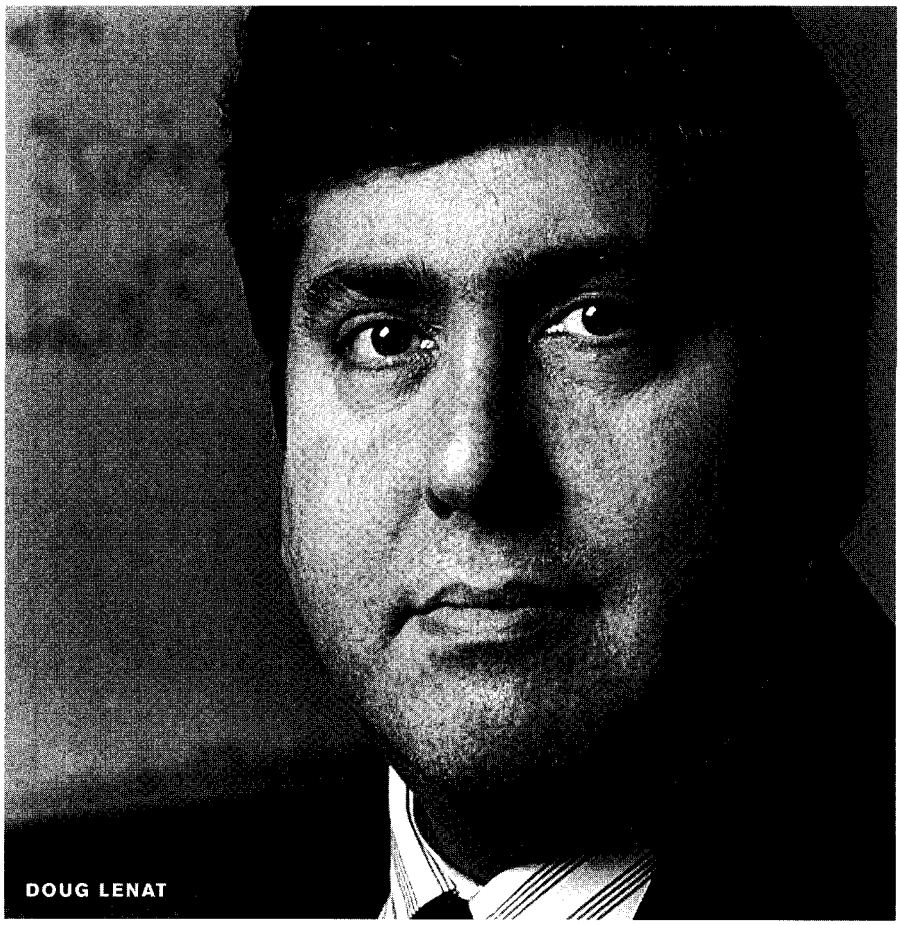
BY THE EARLY 1990s, Cyc had acquired hundreds of thousands of facts about the world and could already produce some startlingly powerful results. For example, Cyc could search through databases to find inconsistent information, such as twins who were listed with different birth dates. Cyc didn't need to be specially programmed to look for that sort of error—it just "knew" the commonsense idea that twins are always the same age. Pleased with Cyc's progress, Lenat spun his venture off from MCC to form Cycorp, a free-standing company.

Still, teaching Cyc new knowledge remains an excruciatingly slow process, filled with trial and error. If the Cyclists make a mistake, or forget to articulate explicitly some aspect of a concept, Cyc can reach some wholly implausible conclusions about the world.

A few months ago, for instance, Charles Klein, Cycorp's thirty-three-year-old director of ontological engineering, was asking Cyc a few test questions when he discovered something odd. Cyc apparently believed that if a bronze statue were melted into slag, it would remain a statue. What had gone wrong? Why was Cyc making such a basic mistake?

After a bit of forensic work, Klein found the problem. The Cyclists hadn't completely distinguished the concepts of bronze and statue. Cyc had been told that bronze was a material that retained its essential property—its "bronzeness," as it were—no matter what state it was in, solid or liquid. But now Cyc was trying to apply that fact to the statue aspect of "bronze statue." Cyc hadn't been told anything about statues that would invalidate its conclusion; nobody had ever thought it necessary to tell Cyc, for example, that statues are only statues if they're more or less in their original form. It's common sense, sure—but who would bother to meditate on it? "Trying to think of *everything*," Klein quips, "is quite daunting."

This is the chief problem that all Cyclists face: Commonsense knowledge is invisible. It's defined as much by what we *don't* say as by what we *do* say. Common knowledge is what we assume everyone has, because it's, well, obvious. This is precisely what makes commonsense knowledge so powerful as an intellectual tool—but it's also what makes it so hard to identify and codify.


DOUG LENAT

CYC ASSUMED THAT IF A BRONZE STATUE WERE MELTED DOWN, IT WOULD REMAIN A STATUE. HOW COULD IT KNOW BETTER?

"There's no book that you could read about common sense," Lenat points out, "that says things like, If you leave a car unlocked for ten seconds, then turn around, the odds of it still being there are really high. But if you leave a car unlocked for ten years, the odds are really low that it'll still be there when you come back."

The example of the unlocked car seems to raise a troublesome theoretical question: Is this common sense because it is a basic *fact* about the world that most everyone knows? Or is it common sense because it demonstrates sound *reasoning*? Just as important: Is this sort of conceptual concern a genuine threat to Cyc, or just more ivory-tower quibbling?

IN ACADEME, Cyc has always been a black sheep. Everyone in AI knows about it, and virtually everyone views it with skepticism. Lenat's critics have lambasted him for lacking a coherent theory of how intelligence and knowledge representation work—and for rushing ahead with an ill-thought-out project. When they look at Cyc, they see nothing but an ad hoc jumble of facts about the world picked in an overly idiosyncratic way by Lenat's team. For them, making human-level AI requires a better theoretical understanding of *human* intelligence and the

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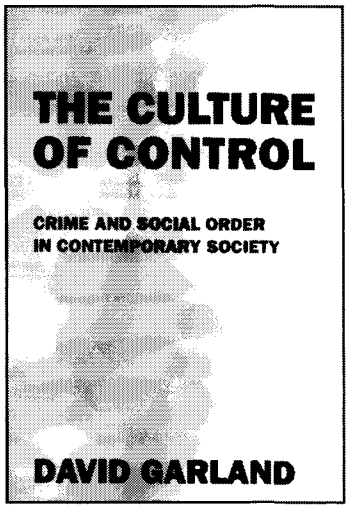

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fundamentals of reasoning and representation—and those are areas that are still, many argue, in their infancy.

In a 1993 issue of *Artificial Intelligence*, several reviewers sharply critiqued Lenat's 1989 book about Cyc. Yale's Drew McDermott led the charge, arguing that it was impossible to build a commonsense database without solving such philosophical problems as "the nature of causality." "We've been thinking about things like that for millennia," he points out.

McDermott suspects that it may not yet be possible to represent real-world common knowledge in logical, orderly languages such as Cyc's CycL—or any other language, for that matter. After all, humans don't always store and manipulate knowledge logically or in language. "If you go through a room and you don't bump into things, is that common sense?" he wonders. Nils Nilsson, an AI pioneer and Stanford professor emeritus, shares that concern. "You can describe in words how to swing a golf club," he concedes. "But can that really tell you how to do it? We still don't really know how to represent knowledge."

Critics and fans of Cyc both recognize that the goal of producing a complete inventory of commonsense facts is almost embarrassingly open to theoretical objections. Because so many philosophical issues about how to represent knowledge remain unsolved, building large knowledge bases is "something of a backwater," according to Ernest Davis, a professor of computer science at New York University and the author of *Representations of Common Sense Knowledge*. Starting in the 1980s, for example, much of the excitement in AI began to center around the use of narrowly focused self-learning systems—like neural nets—to crunch enormous bodies of data. Such systems are intended to "learn" to recognize patterns on their own, instead of being painstakingly taught them by humans. "People like it because it's a lot faster," Davis explains. "You'll never be able to get commonsense AI out of it, but you can do some pretty neat things," such as develop programs that can recognize visual images.

Lenat, however, is unmoved. He bashes right back at the naysayers every chance he gets—often in searingly witty prose. In his response to the 1993 reviews by McDermott and others, he argued that theory-heavy AI experts were suffering

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from the Hamlet syndrome—unwilling to take action and stuck in a circle of philosophizing. Too many AI theorists, he sneered, were "researchers with 'physics envy,' insisting that there must be some elegant 'free lunch' approach to achieving machine intelligence."

For Lenat, having a watertight theory isn't necessary for building useful AI. Quite the contrary: He argues that building a body of commonsense knowledge can *only* be done in a down-and-dirty engineering style. You put together a bunch of facts, test the system, see where it breaks, fix the bugs, and keep on adding more knowledge. Each day, when Cyclists talk to Cyc, they discover new erroneous assumptions that Cyc has—or new information that it doesn't have. "It's iterative. You have to do it every day, keep at it," says the Cyclist Charles Pearce.

Lenat compares building up Cyc to building a bridge. "You know, you have a stream and you want to build a bridge over it—you can either do your best, experiment, and build the bridge. Or you can work out the physics of bridge building," he says. "It's only in the last hundred years or so that the theory of bridge building has been understood. Before that, it was almost like apprenticing to a master. There would be someone who would just intuitively know how to build a bridge—and every now and then, he would build one that would fall down."

Lenat's critics also complain that by developing Cyc in the private sector, he is forced to keep his cards too close to his chest. Aside from publishing his now-dated 1989 book, he and his staff have produced barely a handful of papers about Cyc in academic or trade magazines. In fact, many AI academics—even Lenat's supporters—say they don't know enough of what's going on inside Cyc to be able to approve or disapprove. "He doesn't publish, because he doesn't need to," says one critic. "When I suggest things they ought to do, they just say, Well, we're not being paid to do that."

Compounding this resentment is the fact that in the world of large-scale knowledge bases, Cyc is the biggest—perhaps the only—game in town. As a result, some academics worry that Cyc's example discourages other AI researchers from building competing knowledge bases. Lenat's seventeen years of painstaking labor has shown exactly how difficult and involved the project is. For his part, Lenat quietly relishes the monopoly he has on commonsense knowledge. Some of his funders, including the Department of Defense and GlaxoSmithKline, already use experimental versions of Cyc to help "scrub" data in databases, cleaning out data-entry errors. Ultimately Lenat hopes to license Cyc to all software makers worldwide—as a layer of intelligence that will make their systems less brittle. It could become like "Intel inside," he suggests, or the Microsoft Windows of the AI world.

In the meantime, Lenat cheerily admits to having "almost no relationship" with the academic world. It has rejected him, he argues—not the other way around. Ten years ago, he sent some of his staff to speak, on invitation, at a major academic conference on common sense. Their papers were "really practical stuff," he says. "All this really hard-core work we'd done on how to represent knowledge about concepts like fluids and countries and people." But the conference organizers confined the Cyc papers and speakers to a single panel, Lenat recalls, and few people showed up. "It was like they'd rather talk about doing things than actually hear from people who *are* doing things," he complains.

CYC QUERIES A BIOLOGICAL WARFARE EXPERT: "DO YOU MEAN ANTHRAX (THE HEAVY METAL BAND) OR ANTHRAX (THE BACTERIUM)?"

WHATEVER the theoretical inelegance of Cyc, Lenat can always fall back on one powerful defense: It works well—or at least better than anything comparable so far. During a visit to Cycorp, I watch a videotaped demonstration of a biological warfare expert teaching Cyc about a new weapon similar to anthrax. Cyc demonstrates its grasp of common knowledge—not just about the physical world, but about the rather more ephemeral world of pop culture.

At one point, the expert asks Cyc what it knows about anthrax. Cyc pauses for a second, then asks: "Do you mean Anthrax (the heavy metal band), anthrax (the bacterium), or anthrax infection (the infection)?" The official notes that it's the bacterium, not the band. Cyc asks what type of organism the agent infects. The military official types: "People."

Cyc thinks again for an instant, then responds: "By People, I assume you mean persons, not *People* magazine."

By the end of the exchange, Cyc has successfully absorbed various facts about the agent—how it is destroyed (by encasing it in concrete), its color (green), and which terrorists possess it (Osama bin Laden). But the demo also illustrates some of Cyc's limitations. Obviously, it wasn't easily able to figure out the military context of the exchange—otherwise it wouldn't have needed to ask whether "anthrax" signified a heavy metal band.

An even bigger limitation lurks behind that one: the fact that common sense is almost infinite. This is a problem that still threatens to doom Lenat's grandest ambitions. Sure, you could eventually input the billions of bits of common knowledge worldwide. But at the rate the Cyclists are going, that would take millennia; the limited resources of Cycorp's programmers are not enough. Even Cyc's supporters see this as a major stumbling point. "The amount of knowledge you need will easily outpace the ability of the builders to input it," as Nilsson says.

Part of the problem, Lenat concedes, has been that nobody except for scientists and philosophers trained in formal-logic languages can master CycL well enough to input knowledge reliably into Cyc. "This isn't a skill the average person has," he says. Moreover, Cyc's early development was particularly sensitive. Because one small piece of wrong information could cause enormous problems later, Lenat had to be careful, he says, to prevent erroneous material from getting in. Even though he gave out restricted parts of Cyc's knowledge base to academics to examine and experiment with, he didn't accept new knowledge from them.

But Lenat remains optimistic. As Cyc grows larger and more robust, he says, it is becoming less fragile and more likely to detect nonsense inputs. Starting this fall,

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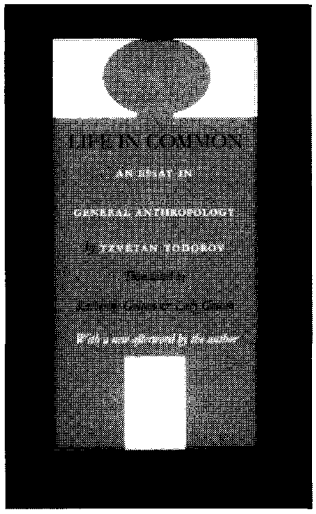

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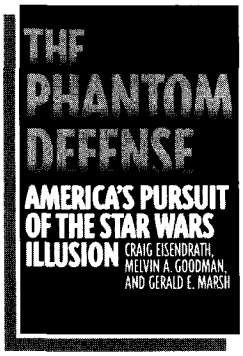

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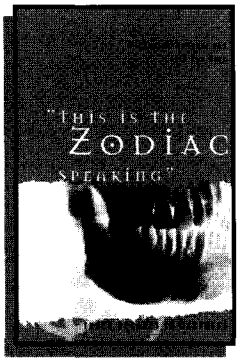

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Lenat will release parts of Cyc—for free—to anyone who wants them. Technically sophisticated users will be able to add knowledge to their own copies of Cyc and, if they choose, send the new information back to Cycorp to be integrated into the master copy—the "master" Cyc, as it were. For the first few years, Lenat's team will carefully scan the outside knowledge to make sure it catches any problems or nonsense information that Cyc doesn't flag on its own. But if all goes well, Cyc will be able to harness the worldwide labor of those who want to input new facts—allowing Cyc's knowledge base to grow at a far more rapid clip than ever before.

Several years down the line, when Lenat has sufficiently improved Cyc's understanding of ordinary English, *anyone*—nonscientists, average Joes, whoever—will be able to talk to it. Eventually Cyc could even be turned loose on the Web, allowing it to read and absorb the mind-boggling collection of information on the Internet. When Cyc becomes an open-source brain, conversant in everyday English, the pace of its growth could be explosive. "The number of people who can help it grow will increase from a few hundred to a billion," Lenat marvels.

But if Cyc becomes open for anyone to talk to, what will it learn? Will people lie, dissemble, or try to delude it? Last fall, MIT's Push Singh assembled a similar experimental on-line project, Open Mind, to collect everyday intelligence. He was a fan of Cyc and wanted to try building his own knowledge database, but he didn't want to spend decades crafting commonsense statements. He met with David Stork, chief scientist at Ricoh Silicon Valley, who has been working on projects that allow multiple people to collaborate on-line. Singh and Stork realized that an open-source approach would be useful for gathering common knowledge and quickly assembled an on-line database at www.openmind.org to solicit facts from nonspecialists. It was up and running by late last summer; by the summer of 2001, nearly seven thousand people had input more than 300,000 facts.

I look over a handful of the entries. Some are obviously uncontroversial, such as "A square is a closed shape with four equal sides at right angles" or "An adult male human is called a man." Others veer into the realm of custom and opinion, such as "The first thing you do when you

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hang out at a bar is order a drink" and "Christmas is a commercialized holiday."

For now, Singh has no way of checking the information's veracity, other than reading each input himself. "At this point, we're just seeing whether this is a viable way to collect commonsense knowledge," he says. But after examining several thousand of the information pieces that have been input, he's found that contributors are by and large honest. Their mistakes are not so much sneaky as inadvertent, the result of unclear writing. A better trained user, for example, might have modified the example above to say "Many people feel Christmas is a commercialized holiday." As Singh notes: "People really want to be of help! But they're untrained in how to express information clearly."

Though Open Mind is a collection of plain-language statements that does not include a formal logical language, Lenat is watching Singh's project with interest. When he opens up Cyc to the layperson, he'll face the same challenges. Cyc's basic common sense will have to be robust enough to recognize clearly erroneous information and reject it. More problematically, it will have to recognize when it encounters a subjective belief and categorize it as such. For example, Cyc might read some information about a car on a General Motors Web site. Lenat says Cyc ought to trust basic facts on the site, such as the identifying numbers of specific car parts, since "General Motors is actually the best expert on that." But other material—such as "supposedly third-party reports that just happen to favor General Motors," Lenat notes sardonically—ought to be disregarded.

The potential for mistakes is serious: Cyc's accepting a belief as a fact would be akin to an impressionable young kid's absorbing a dubious bit of information from an adult. At that point, the only way to fix it would be to do "brain surgery"—have a Cyclist go in and manually rewrite the fact in CycL. If Cyc is open and there are millions and millions of new facts being input every day, that could be virtually impossible.

"You begin to see just how complex this could be," Lenat says.

STILL, he's willing to try. After so many years of pounding away at Cyc, Lenat has nothing to lose in pressing ahead. He draws me a graph that shows Cyc's learning curve. From 1985 to 2000, the line curves upward gradually—the "brain surgery" phase during which the Cyclists input knowledge by hand. But then at 2001, the curve steepens dramatically as the open-source phase takes over, and thousands—or millions—more inputters join in. Lenat extends the curve maybe ten years into the future. As the curve reaches the point where Cyc has read everything there is to read and spoken with everyone willing to tell it facts, it will begin to flatten out. "It'll know all there is to know," he says. "At that point, the only way it could learn more is by doing experiments itself."

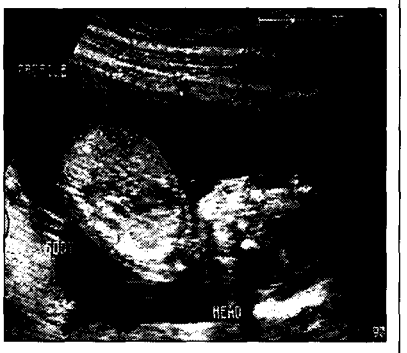
Will 2001, then, be as talismanic as some would hope—the year that HAL-like intelligence is born? Lenat is optimistic. "I'm very, very excited," he says. But he's made rash predictions in the past: In the late 1980s, he confidently forecast that 1994 would be the year Cyc would begin learning via natural-language conversations with average people.

Intelligence is unruly stuff—which makes the behavior of artificial intelligence sometimes hard to predict. Lenat tells me a cautionary tale from his days as a young professor in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Back then, he designed a self-learning program called EURISKO. It was intended to generate new heuristics—new types of search strategies—all on its own by slightly mutating bits of LISP computer code. And it did successfully manage to produce unique new rules to parse data sets.

But then trouble struck. In the mornings when Lenat arrived at work, he'd find the program had mysteriously shut down overnight. This happened again and again, puzzling him. What was causing it to crash?

Finally he discovered that it wasn't a crash at all; it was a strange and unexpected new strategy. At some point, EURISKO had altered its rules so that "making no errors at all" was as important as "making productive new discoveries." Then EURISKO realized that if it turned itself off, it wouldn't make mistakes. It was bizarre behavior—but it was logical. It made sense. "Just not common sense," Lenat says with a laugh.

Clive Thompson is the technology columnist for *Newsday* and editor at large for *Shift*. He can be reached at clive@bway.net.



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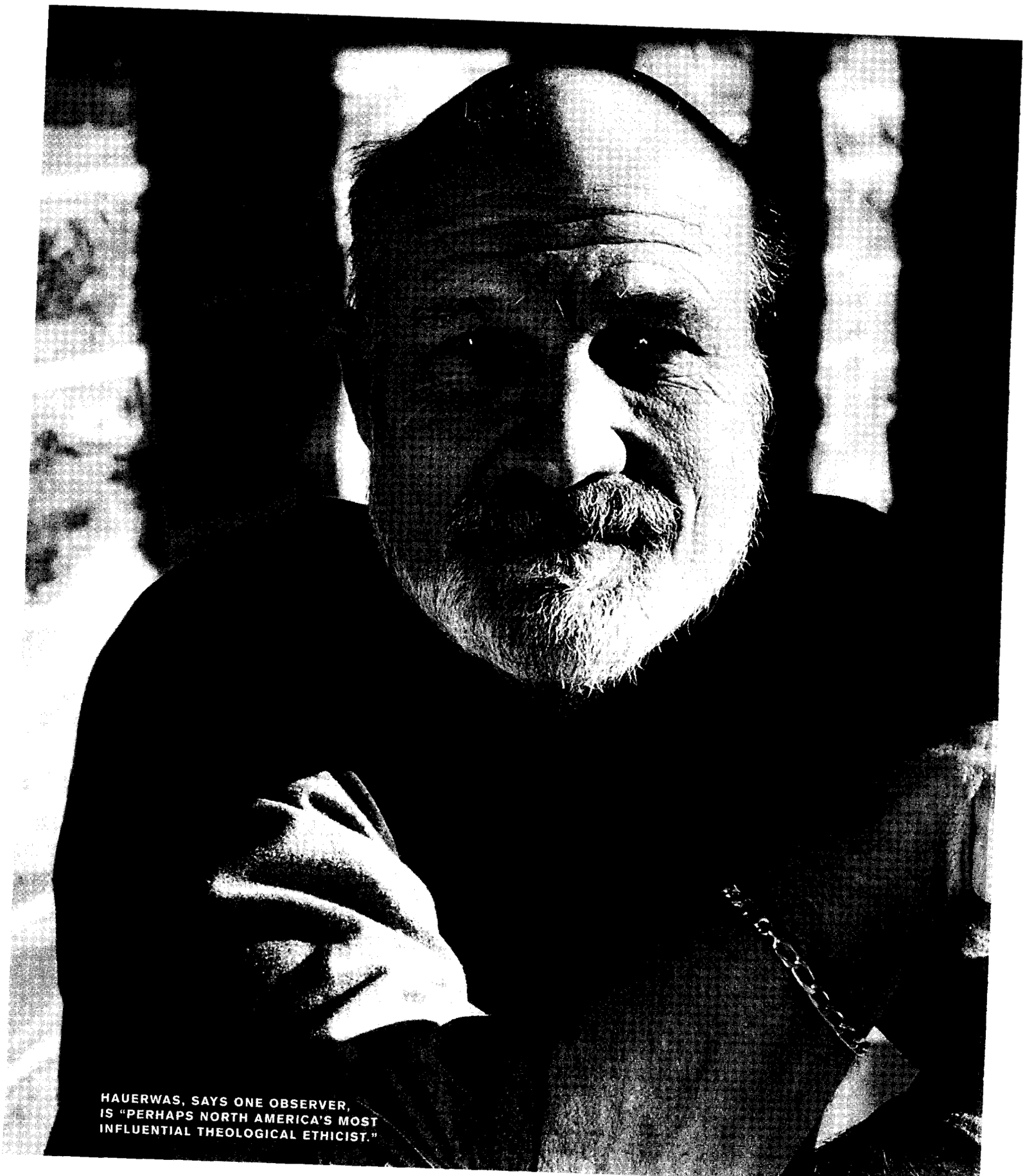

HAUERWAS, SAYS ONE OBSERVER, IS "PERHAPS NORTH AMERICA'S MOST INFLUENTIAL THEOLOGICAL ETHICIST."

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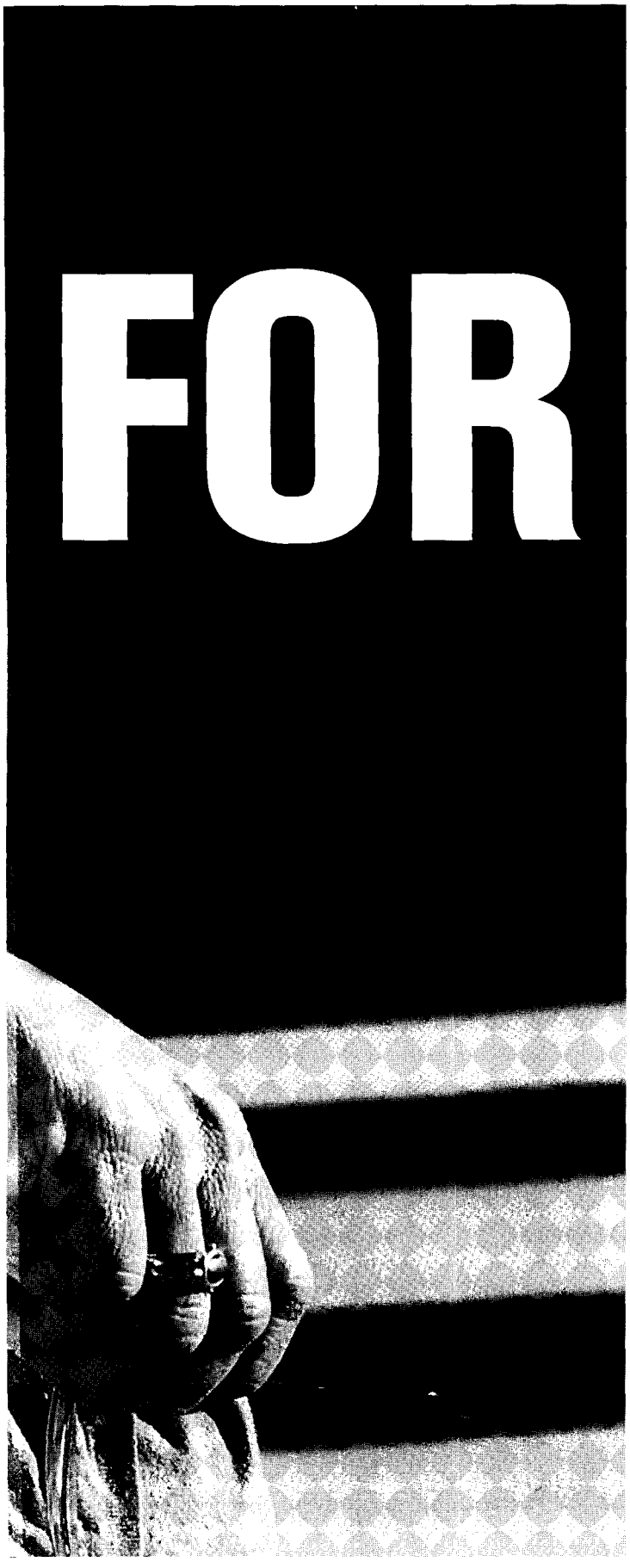

FOR GOD, NOT COUNTRY

THE UN-AMERICAN THEOLOGY OF STANLEY HAUERWAS

BY **MARK OPPENHEIMER**

"IMAGINE JAMES CARVILLE AS A THEOLOGIAN." THAT'S HOW the Princeton religion professor Jeffrey Stout describes Stanley Hauerwas. And it's true that Hauerwas has that same mischievous face, youthful and almost serene even as he says the most bilious things. His accent is Ross Perot's, but the timbre is gentler. He is also, according to the Catholic University theologian John Berkman, "perhaps North America's most important theological ethicist." He has twice been nominated to be president of the Society of Christian Ethics—and has lost each time to a less controversial figure. He laughs hard and often at his own jokes. He is ribald; the novelist and literary critic Frank Lentricchia calls Hauerwas "the commander of the only unself-conscious foul mouth in the professoriat."

Hauerwas sits in his office at the Duke Divinity School, which, like Hauerwas, is at least nominally Methodist. He is surrounded by walls of books, and he wears a green shirt with a Nautica crest and a tie covered in psychedelic animals. I'm hoping to learn the origins of his Christian pacifism. Or to discover if it's true that he once said divorced people shouldn't be buried in Christian cemeteries. Or to hear about the time he scandalized the world of theology by saying "goddamn" in a *Newsweek* article. (Hauerwas defends himself: "I was the only one in the article who mentioned God, and I did it twice!")

Hauerwas, who is sixty-one years old, is telling me about his boyhood in Pleasant Grove, Texas, where you went to church

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on Sunday morning and got saved in the revival that evening. "But I was never saved," he says. "And I was thirteen or fourteen years old and finger-fucking the girls, and I was confused. So I decided to be a minister. That's what my parents thought I was going to college for, to be a minister. My father was the only person in his family to graduate from high school. He wanted to go to college, but it was the Depression. Those hammers over there on the wall, those are his. He was a bricklayer."

In 1958, Hauerwas left home for Southwestern University. There, he apprenticed himself to a professor named John Score, who taught him religion and philosophy and took him to Dallas to see art and film. He then went to Yale Divinity School, where he learned the Yale approach to theology, which emphasized the importance of tradition; it resisted, at least somewhat, the 1960s trend to think of the church as a malleable instrument of social justice. Even still, Hauerwas says, "I went to Yale thinking I was going to be a liberal Christian."

That's liberal in both senses: politically liberal, but also a contributing, supportive member of the liberal nation-state, someone for whom Christianity never conflicted with the American project. Hauerwas, like all theologians of that era, was reckoning with the recent memory of fascism; he suspected that only American democracy, perhaps aided by a free-thinking, social-justice Christianity, could prevent its recurrence. "I didn't see how you could believe in the Resurrection," he says. "And I thought all theology at that time had to be done in light of the murder of Europe's Jews. I figured it was the liberal Protestants who had stood up to the Nazis. But guess what—it was not the liberal Protestants who stood up to the Nazis. It was the evangelicals."

Hauerwas took this insight to his first teaching job, at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois. Though Augustana is a religious school, affiliated with the Lutheran Church, it was not a good fit for Hauerwas, who lasted only two years there. In a faculty discussion, Hauerwas defended affirmative action by saying, "We hire mediocre M.A. whites every year, why can't we go out and hire mediocre M.A. blacks?" Augustana's president, Hauerwas says, immediately resolved to fire him.

From Augustana, Hauerwas moved to Notre Dame, where he stayed for fourteen years. He learned to admire Roman Catholic tradition and the Thomist writings. He even began to take instruction toward converting, before his first wife threatened to leave him if he continued. At the same time, he also deepened his interest in the pacifist writings of the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder.

During Hauerwas's tenure, Notre Dame hired Father Richard McBrien to lead its theology department. Hauerwas and McBrien did not like each other, and they still don't. Hauerwas left happily for Duke University, where he has been since 1984. In that time, he's become very famous, as theologians go. His writings fill almost thirty books. His preferred form is the essay, and he picks deliberately provocative titles like "Sex in Public: How Adventurous Christians Are Doing It" and "Why Gays (as a Group) Are Morally Superior to Christians (as a Group)." His many essay collections, from *Vision and Virtue* (1974) to *A Better Hope* (2000), address topics like marriage, euthanasia, abortion, the Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope, murder, Texas, the novel *Watership Down,* and baseball.

His critics complain that he has yet to write a systematic treatise, the "big book" that will tell people what it means to be a Hauerwasian. But there *is* a term "Hauerwasian," and his critics don't have adjectives made from their names. So perhaps our job is to figure out what "Hauerwasian" means.

"HAUERWASIAN" means, for one thing, funny; it also means both self-aggrandizing and self-deprecating. Hauerwas is often sure he's right, but he wants to fight about it. He doesn't care if his combatants don't have doctorates, whether they're preachers or chimney sweeps. The Ivy League polish never fully took: He still calls himself a "gregarious" reader when he means "voracious," talks about the delightful "shishkah" a Jewish boy is dating, marvels at an athlete's "heighth." He is famous for his rants at conferences; everyone has a favorite story about Hauerwas addressing a crowd of prim evangelical scholars and loosening their girdles with some choice expletives. He calls all his graduate students each year to sing "Happy Birthday." He has a certain degree of humility that comes from being raised poor, being left by a mentally ill wife after twenty-five years of marriage, and leaving his first two academic jobs with his bosses happy to see him go. But he also holds the uncharitable conviction that many Christian theologians of the past hundred years have been wrong most of the time, and he's eager to tell you why this is so.

HAUERWAS GIVES HIS ESSAYS PROVOCATIVE TITLES LIKE "SEX IN PUBLIC: HOW ADVENTUROUS CHRISTIANS ARE DOING IT" AND "WHY GAYS (AS A GROUP) ARE MORALLY SUPERIOR TO CHRISTIANS (AS A GROUP)."

This is the story he tells. Since the end of the nineteenth century, church has been little more than the place you went so that your neighbors didn't think you were a communist or an atheist. Churched people were seen to be good Americans, and good Americans went to church. That is the role the Protestant mainline auditioned for after World War II: shepherd of American citizenship. President Dwight Eisenhower encouraged the cultivation of religious belief, regardless of creed. As the historian Sydney Ahlstrom wrote of the postwar years, "There seemed to be a consensus that personal religious faith was an essential element in proper patriotic commitment."

In the years following World War II, Reinhold Niebuhr, a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, was the most famous theologian in America. He was well known for his commitment to economic justice and the protection of human rights abroad. But he disagreed with the Social Gospel, the liberal Christian philosophy regnant since the turn of the

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century. Adherents to the Social Gospel movement were wide-eyed progressives who believed that social engineering and economic fairness would help perfect the world. They were optimists. But their view seemed untenable after the Depression and World War II, and Niebuhr's "Christian realism" provided a corrective. Niebuhr believed that man's sinful nature required liberal Christians to abandon their Pollyannaish vision and admit the necessity of war and coercion. For a country so recently at war, Niebuhr's stance justified the military-industrial complex, the draft, and the church's participation in the martial state. It was a theology made for Hiroshima.

In the 1960s, mainline Christians accepted the desirability of the American army and state. Christians might still criticize or try to reform the United States, but they did not doubt that as a bulwark against evil, it was doing God's work on earth. During Vietnam and the civil rights movement, even liberal preachers tended to see themselves as working with the government rather than against it. Then, in the 1970s, conservative Christians discovered the perks of joining the political game. Led by groups like Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, whose members were inspired by the born-again Jimmy Carter, evangelical Christians shed their outsider status. Conservative Methodist, Southern Baptist, and fundamentalist preachers who had always been apolitical, waiting for the Kingdom of God, awoke to the election cycle. In the 1990s, the Christian Coalition's Ralph Reed promised to harness their power to form a more Christian union.

By the time Richard Nixon resigned, it had become standard practice for Christian, Jewish, or ecumenical prayers to open sessions of Congress; for military chaplains to help assuage the consciences of murderers; for football coaches to pray to Jesus before games. Christians, according to Hauerwas, now served the Man: openly, avowedly, surely. Christianity had become patriotism.

Today, the Christian remains loyal to the nation-state—and that's idol worship. The church needs to stop serving the Man and begin serving the Son of Man. Hauerwas believes that the true Christian ought to live on the social and political margins. The true Christian, recognizing that the story of the Cross requires pacifism, might refuse to fight the capitalist's wars. He also might find the world of market capitalism so inhospitable, so hostile to the formation of virtue, that he opts out—into separate schools and summer camps and circles of friends. He is a resident alien. He witnesses.

JOHN HOWARD YODER HAD A FORMATIVE INFLUENCE ON HAUERWAS; JEFFREY STOUT, FATHER RICHARD McBRIEN, AND AMY LAURA HALL RAISE QUESTIONS ABOUT HAUERWAS'S POLITICAL IMPACT AND SWAGGERING STYLE.

That is what a Hauerwasian believes Christians should do. Stand apart and witness. For thirty years, Hauerwas has been telling other Christians that they have become tools of late-modern capitalism and neglected their unique message. He thinks that a church founded by the great radical outsider has, on the right and the left, forgotten its peasant past and become drunk on the Georgetown party circuit. He thinks most preachers have been abetted by Christian theologians in thinking their job is to help people be slightly less bad American consumers rather than better Christians. He believes there is much worth dying for but nothing he'll kill for. He has lots of enemies, but he believes they're the right ones.

HAUERWAS has been influential in part because his views haven't changed much. As the Creighton University theologian R.R. Reno says, Hauerwas "has the virtue of never saying anything different." To begin with, he has always been a strong opponent of "quandary ethics." To Hauerwas, the question has never been "What shall I do if presented with this dilemma?" but rather "What kind of person shall I be?" The ethicist's job is not to provide answers to discrete moral problems, as in *The New York Times Magazine* column The Ethicist, but to figure out how to build a person who will naturally incline toward the right answers. Like Aristotle or the Duke philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, whose work has profoundly influenced him, Hauerwas is concerned with virtue. He believes that ethics inheres in character and that good character is formed by discipleship to traditions and apprenticeship to good people. Just what the "good" virtues are can be debated—Hauerwas says that they are hope and patience—but the premise must not be. Contrary to the wisdom of the liberal tradition from Immanuel Kant through John Rawls, the ethical cannot be codified in abstract principles.

A virtue ethicist believes that good people will be built differently by different groups, and for the Hauerwasian Christian that means retreating from commitments to America and its economy. In Hauerwas's graduate seminar on Yoder, I listen as one student, John Nugent, discusses the Christian community he and his wife are moving to Long Island to found. Hauerwas interrupts with some advice on how to keep the community holy: "How about if you say, 'If you join our community, you can't leave without our permission? That means if the company moves you to New Jersey, we'll pay to keep you here and keep you going until you get another job.'... I mean, if our salvation really depends on our bodily presence, then can we leave?" (When Hauerwas was offered his present job at Duke, he told his fellow members of the Broadway United Methodist Church in South Bend, Indiana, that he would stay if they told him to.)

Later, he offers another suggestion to the future preacher, who wonders how his planned Christian community can enforce tithing and economic justice in its ranks. "Whoever joins the church, make sure everyone else knows what he makes," Hauerwas says, pleased to have solved the problem.

Hauerwas's influence over his students is considerable. When I had lunch with

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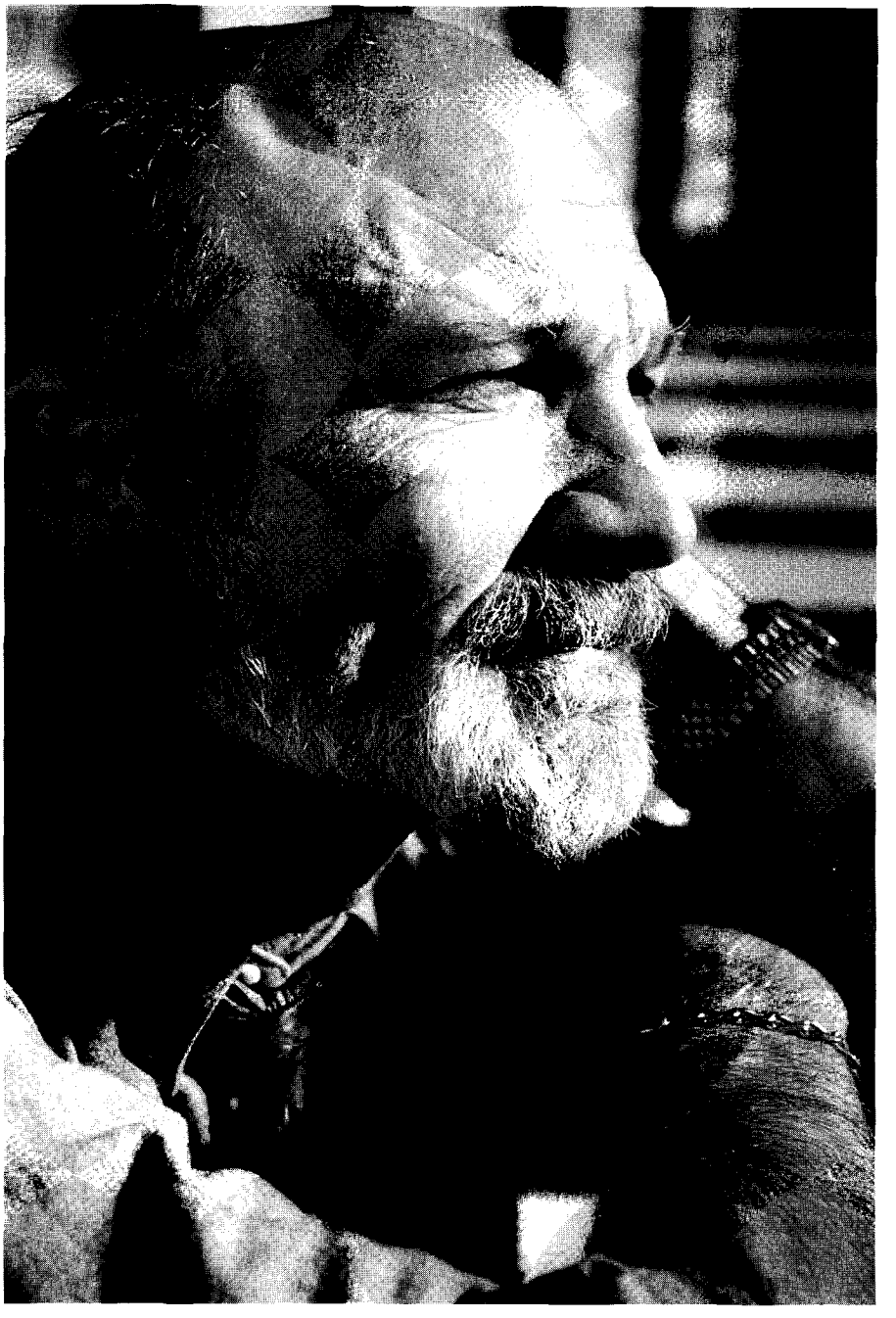
his doctoral students, all eight of them identified themselves as pacifists. They're moved by passages in Hauerwas's writing such as this one: "Surely, the saddest aspect of the [Gulf] war for Christians should have been its celebration as a victory and of those who fought it as heroes.... The flags and yellow ribbons on churches are testimony to how little Christians in America realize that our loyalty to God is incompatible with those who would war in the name of an abstract justice."

THINK FOR A moment how strange the Hauerwasian world is beginning to look. It's a world in which the churches consider war so great a human failing that they refuse to honor returning veterans; in which the churches insist that you publicly disclose your income to keep you honest in matters of tithing and charity; in which your congregation might ask that you not leave without the church's permission, since it is the endurance of community over time that builds character and nurtures virtue.

It is, above all, an illiberal world. What costs Hauerwas the most friends, besides his foul mouth, are his aversion to liberalism and his preference for, as he puts it, "all the things about tradition-formed virtuous people." Tradition means memories—memories that persist over generations because parents dare to indoctrinate their young. Memories are chauvinist: They imply that our ways are better than their ways. But they are not intrinsically militaristic. It is only when memories fail that force is needed to hold people together.

As a chauvinist, Hauerwas is not impressed by liberal arts pedagogy. Teachers who pretend to have no opinions train students who have no opinions, and Hauerwas would rather see diversity *among* schools—Duke training students to think Methodist; Brandeis training students to think Jewish; Notre Dame steeping its kids in Catholicism—than diversity *within* schools, which typically results in professors afraid to believe anything important for fear of offending people. "Universities," Hauerwas says, "teach you not to buy paintings of tigers on black velvet. You're supposed to buy van Gogh prints. It's teaching you how to be a tasteful capitalist.... I asked one of my colleagues at Duke, 'If you could somehow get Maimonides or Aquinas back, would you hire them for the religion department?' He said, 'No, because they're confessional'"—meaning they confess beliefs rather than profess facts.



Today's teachers, Hauerwas believes, divorce students from honorable and nurturing narratives—like Judaism and Christianity, or perhaps Marxism and Rastafarianism—and give them the Enlightenment narrative of reason, but with the lie that it's not a narrative. "The story that liberalism teaches us," he writes in *A Community of Character*, "is that we have no story." Hauerwas prefers indoctrination to the arrogance of objectivity. When David Toole, a Duke graduate student who had come late to Christianity, was about to become a father, Hauerwas offered some advice: "I said, 'David, are you going to have the baby baptized?' He said, 'Yes.' I said, 'David, I know I have power over you because I'm your director. You know me, I love you. I don't think you ought to do to your baby what you won't do to yourself. You ought to be baptized.'" Toole was baptized, and Hauerwas and his second wife, Paula, are the child's godparents.

Still, Hauerwas is not a typical proselytizer. He dislikes what passes in America

CHRIS HILDRETH/DUKE U.

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for evangelism, the television preachers and stadium exhorters. He prefers the Mennonites' mission model: Send people forth to live good lives in far-flung places and hope others wonder what they're up to. The nearest he's come to soul saving is when he suggested that the ex-Catholic Frank Lentricchia speak to a priest. "I was surprised (still am) that I wasn't able to resist Stanley's suggestion," Lentricchia has written. Hauerwas sent his student Father Michael Baxter to talk with Lentricchia, and soon Lentricchia was on a retreat at Mepkin Abbey in South Carolina, praying the liturgy daily, the one he had known as a child.

"My deepest criticism of liberalism is the loss of memory," Hauerwas says while driving back from Greensboro College, a small Methodist school in Greensboro, North Carolina, where he has just given a talk titled "Why Cheating Is Worse Than Murder in Universities." "America," he explains, "in some ways stands for the utopian dream that you can shape a people who share nothing in common into some kind of workable social order if you just have enough money and fair legal procedures. And therefore, you get to describe your life as a free individual, and, Oh, by the way, I just *happen* to be African American, I *happen* to be Jewish, I *happen* to be Czechoslovakian. Americans keep saying, 'What the fuck do these blacks want? You can move to the suburbs, have three TVs—I mean, what's a little slavery between friends?'"

AS HAUERWAS sees it, the point is commitment. He likes observant Jews and Catholics; one of his closest friends at Duke is the professor of religion Vincent Cornell, a convert to Islam. To be committed requires training and discipline. Discipline builds virtue, as MacIntyre argues, and Hauerwas shares MacIntyre's love of crafts: Both men talk about activities like baseball, bricklaying, wood hewing, and chess. Hauerwas loves the Durham Bulls and is a familiar face in the baseball bleachers.

Practice under the great ones, Hauerwas believes, and you will learn to be great. The goal is not great acts but great men. Although Hauerwas believes that Christianity entails pacifism, he admires the military. True, they are willing to kill—but they are also willing to die. They have some sense of sacrifice, the way Jews and Palestinians do. It's exactly what cosmopolitan man lacks. Urbane city preachers joined the Nazi Party; pious, pacifist Jehovah's Witnesses refused to be conscripted and were sent to the camps with Jews.

That emphasis on suffering and sacrifice also informs Hauerwas's work in medical ethics, which constitutes much of his writing. He shares the Catholic comprehensive pro-life position: against the death penalty, war, abortion, and euthanasia. But when he writes about the need to carry fetuses to term, or care for the infirm and handicapped, he does not sound like the typical religious moralist. The Aristotelian in him takes over, and he focuses on the virtue that a practice of caregiving might instill in a community of givers and receivers alike. What kind of people are *we*, he asks, that we structure child rearing and care of the elderly around our material needs, aborting and warehousing those who might keep us from worry-free vacations or late-model cars? Jerry Falwell keeps talking about the babies' souls; Hauerwas worries about ours.

Of the retarded, Hauerwas writes: "But in our joys and in our sufferings they recognize something of their joy and their suffering, and they offer to share their neediness with us.... We are thus freed from the false and vicious circle of having to appear strong before others' weakness, and we are then able to join with the retarded in the common project of sharing our needs and satisfactions. As a result we discover we no longer fear them ...."

All the familiar Hauerwasian tropes are in that passage: the pacific call to intentional weakness; the joining in a "common project"; the construction of the kind of community that breeds virtue. One can hear in the phrase "the false and vicious circle of having to appear strong before others' weakness" echoes of Hauerwas's descriptions elsewhere of capitalism's ability to "produce shitty people." "Greed has always existed," he has written, "but this is the first time the system encourages it as a virtue."

By laying abortion and euthanasia at the door of market capitalism and not drugs or feminism or rock and roll, Hauerwas alienates the jingoist Christian right. ("In Texas," he says, "it was unclear whether the Southern Baptist pastors started looking like Texas politicians, or Texas politicians started looking like Southern Baptist preachers.") But he also offends the religious left. He believes, after all, that the Bible is true—though the way he construes "true" is slippery: "When I say Christianity is true," he explains, "I mean that I'm willing to die for it." He honors concepts like commandment and sin in a way that can lend comfort to those who want women to keep their silence in churches (1 Cor. 14:34) or who believe that "if a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death" (Lev. 20:13). He's not a biblical literalist—he does not say, for instance, that homosexuals will go to hell—but with his talk of resurrection and sin, he often sounds like one.

"I DESCRIBE MYSELF AS A PACIFIST," HAUERWAS SAYS, "BECAUSE I'M OBVIOUSLY A VIOLENT SON OF A BITCH."

Jeffrey Stout, whose book *Ethics After Babel* is a classic plea for the kind of liberal worldview Hauerwas abhors, thinks Hauerwas puts a seductively radical veneer on a basically conservative message. "The secret of Hauerwas's vast influence in the church," he speculates, "may lie in the comforting thought that the strength of one's sentimental identification with the church can by itself secure non-complicity with the evils of the world at little cost to the Christian. That's not the message he intends to communicate, of course, but that's what's coming across at the subliminal level. Hauerwas's central practical teaching is absolute pacifism. But in an

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era when the U.S. has ended military conscription, what exactly does this pacifism demand? Hauerwas gives his followers the feeling that they are doing something brave and costly. But I haven't heard him prescribing any form of action that would disturb the routine of your average well-to-do suburbanite."

Stout is saying—and this is a common charge—that a Hauerwas disciple, for all her pacifist convictions and devotion to a countercultural church, will not end up living very differently from a fundamentalist mother homeschooling her children. Both women will think of themselves as brave exemplars of religious integrity while doing nothing about poverty, war, or female genital mutilation. They may achieve a kind of Amish authenticity—but then again, the Amish mostly take care of their own without worrying much about the health of the polity.

Stout is right that Hauerwas has not produced a systematic treatise of resistance, but Hauerwas does offer a thousand little schemes of subversion—some of them quite risky. For a Christian to stand up in a small Southern town and denounce the Gulf War and its veterans—that would take some chutzpah. Or imagine the reaction of the chamber of commerce if one hundred people in a company town gave their church veto power over job transfers. In *Resident Aliens,* co-written with Duke chaplain William Willimon, Hauerwas questions the project of church day-care centers, noting that they often exist to make life easier for materialistic two-career couples. A pastor who voiced that view would risk losing many congregants; those who stuck by her could create real problems for the American way of life. One does not have to subscribe to Hauerwas's messianic faith to imagine that such witnessing in our midst could make us better, or at least very different, people.

If some critics ignore the possibilities of Hauerwas's project, it's in part because of his aggressive certitude. "In our time," Hauerwas says, "Christian humility cannot but help appear as arrogance." Hauerwas's own arrogance, often expressed with cuss words, has consequences for how people respond to his theology. Richard Mouw, president of the evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary, says that most ethicists take Hauerwas "very seriously" despite his habit of contesting "views that he disagrees with in the language that he learned when he was a bricklayer." And yet, Mouw says, "there are some ethicists who have been stung by his way of debating and find him difficult to take. Stanley has to take responsibility for those assessments of his style and content."

Amy Laura Hall, Hauerwas's junior colleague in theological ethics at Duke, is a Methodist minister who taught herself Danish for her Kierkegaard dissertation at Yale while raising a small daughter and organizing graduate students into a union. If anyone can handle the Hauerwas brio, it's Hall. "When I met Stanley," she recalls, "he said, 'I'm a ball scratcher.' I said, 'Stanley, if I had 'em, I'd scratch 'em, too.'" Hall is also from Texas, and she can play his game but doesn't like to. "I've tried to get him to see what 'fuck' sounds like in the ears of some women," she says. "The gender stuff with him is so tricky—

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and at his best, Stanley knows that."

Hall thinks that Hauerwas is all too eager to prove that the Christian theologian is no docile egghead. "Christian character will at times be mistaken as weakness, and that's okay," she says. "And that's something we don't do enough at Duke—cultivate a willingness to look weak." Hall worries about the prospect of pacifists carrying themselves more like Navy SEALs than like humbled Christians. And she's right that there seems to be a paradox. No matter how much Hauerwas talked about peace, I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd want him on my side in a bar fight. He almost agrees: "First of all," he explains, "I describe myself as a pacifist because I'm obviously a violent son of a bitch. I hate the language of pacifism because it's so passive. If you are nonviolent, you'd better be ready for a lot of conflict."

Hall's point about Hauerwas's swaggering seems sound, and it resembles other criticisms that his style, so direct and clear in both writing and speaking, can make matters a little too simple. "The most troubling and least original aspect of his style is his tendency to assimilate his opponents to a single type, the stereotypical liberal," says Stout. "Stan's a master of hyperbole," agrees Richard John Neuhaus, the former antiwar Lutheran minister, now a Catholic priest, who invited Hauerwas to join the editorial board of his conservative journal *First Things*.

R.R. Reno says that Hauerwas is doubly reductionist, simplifying the liberal state while idealizing the church. Still, Reno admires Hauerwas; though he says that Hauerwas is "not the smartest guy," he believes that Hauerwas has "a nose for what the real problems are facing the church today." It's a comment that Hauerwas would appreciate, since he often brags that he is "not a thinker," just a theologian trying to help people be better Christians. Hauerwas sees himself as the guileless child or the Shakespearean fool, wise in a way that is both simple and profound.

"His approach is not in line with centuries of moral tradition," says Notre Dame's Father McBrien, a liberal Catholic frequently sought by the media for his willingness to criticize Pope John Paul II. "It's us-against-them sectarianism, Christianity as a zone of righteousness, and we're identified by that story, and we don't care if nobody else can understand the story, and we have no obligation to reach out, dialogue, and adapt." Likewise, Stout blames Hauerwas for encouraging Christians to neglect the American conversation: "The most dangerous element in his thinking is the traditionalist rejection of liberal society.... His influence in the seminaries is partly responsible for the decline of the religious left, a development that has had horrible consequences for American politics generally."

Hauerwas is delighted to note that when Stout and McBrien, men of the left, criticize him, they sound just like the conservatives who dislike him. On the right and the left, the commitment to America is assumed; the quarrel is only about what America should look like. Mormons believe, as a matter of theology, that America is the new Israel. The philosopher Richard Rorty imagines the United States as a kind of secular promised land, its prophets Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. Niebuhr's America is a powerful vision. So I ask Hauerwas, "What's wrong with having, instead of commitment to a God and a religious community's narrative, a profound form of citizenship?"

"A thick conception of citizenship?" he says. "Another word for that is 'nationalism.' What is the defining event of America? World War II, because what Americans are dying to have is something worth dying for. War becomes the great event in American life, because that's when we send the young out to die and be killed. To die in wars, to give us the belief as Americans that we think there's something worth dying for—to die for who your democratically elected leader says you should die for, and to protect the sacrifices of the last war.

"It's an extraordinary sacrificial system, but sacrificing to the wrong god—Mars. I admire people for making the great sacrifice of their unwillingness to kill. But it's the wrong sacrifice. Christianity is an alternative to that sacrificial system. We believe the ultimate sacrifice has been made, and you don't have to repeat it over and over again in the name of nations."

All of this can make sense, of course, if you have messianic faith—if you believe, with Hauerwas, that Christ died on the Cross and that he will return in the end times to announce the Kingdom of God on earth. That belief produces genuine humility, including the observation that the United States is but 225 years old, that Rome, too, was probably pretty arrogant in its youth, and that liberal constitutions haven't kept a country like France from domestic tyranny or wartime impotence. Republics have failed human beings before, but Jesus never has.

I don't believe that, of course. Based on the evidence, I will choose the republican community over the religious one. I don't want to live amid the shells and mortar of Israel or Northern Ireland. Hauerwas admires those two lands, where people are willing to die for their beliefs, and do. I'll take New Haven. But in making that choice, I also remember that Hauerwas has some evidence on his side, too. When he looks for communities that do the best job of handling American freedom without losing themselves to materialism, he sees Mennonites, Jehovah's Witnesses, and ultraorthodox Jews: people who would rather have children than VCRs, who don't send their old and retarded to institutions, and who rarely harm their neighbors. They're not good liberals. They're weird, and they make us uncomfortable, but I suspect that they're much more likely to die for me than to kill me. And if they die for me, it will be to honor their Bible, not my Constitution.

JEFFREY STOUT SAYS HAUERWAS'S INFLUENCE IN THE SEMINARIES IS "PARTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DECLINE OF THE RELIGIOUS LEFT."

Mark Oppenheimer, a graduate fellow of the Institute for the Advanced Study of Religion at Yale, has written for *Harper's* and *The New Yorker*. "Memories of a Lesbian Girlhood," his essay about sexuality at prep school, appears in the Spring/Summer issue of *Southwest Review*.

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WHITE MEN CAN'T CONTEXTUALIZE

BY **CHRISTOPHER SHEA**

STANDARDIZED TESTS MAKE ME NERVOUS, and what I'm doing feels an awful lot like taking a standardized test. I'm sitting in a windowless, underventilated room in the basement of a social-science building on the University of Michigan campus, staring at the screen of an old Mac PowerBook. Pulse: up slightly. Palms: more than a tad on the humid side.

My assignment is simple, explains the mellow, ponytailed grad student hovering over me. I'm to watch the screen, identify the images that appear there, and rate my confidence in my judgments. It's just a psychology experiment, with nothing riding on it. Still, it's never a happy experience having the limits of one's mental ability probed.

For a brief moment before the test starts, I imagine wowing the lab with my unprecedented perspicacity ("This guy's amazing!"). But the dream founders quickly. The first image to pop up is easy: a small, nubbly orange square, just below the center of the screen. Clearly a basketball in extreme close-up. My confidence is high. The second image is more challenging, but manageable: several small, crisp shapes that appear to be elements of a bigger picture. I see fur, hind legs, big ears. I guess "rabbit." Medium confidence. (Not bad: I'm later told it was a kangaroo.) The third image is—

The third image is a total wash. My eyes dart around, scanning for something to latch on to. They don't find it. The screen is a blurry, fuzzy mess. It fades to white. No idea, no guess.

As the experiment continues, that's the pattern. There are sharp, fragmentary images that I can identify: bits of a turtle's shell, a pineapple, a tiger. And there are blurrier, more complete scenes that stump me. I get used to it. What is harder to grasp—what, honestly, is almost impossible to wrap my mind around—is the supposed explanation for this discrepancy. According to the reigning theory in this lab, I can't interpret the fuzzy images because I was raised in a European-American culture

In an extraordinary series of experiments on this campus, most under the direction of Richard Nisbett, one of the nation's most prominent academic psychologists, researchers have been charting the cognitive differences between Americans and East Asians. Nisbett and his students have found striking variation in how people brought up in the East and the West view the world—and when they say "view the world," they mean it literally.

Nisbett's group has discovered that East Asians perform differently from Americans on some of the classic social-psychology experiments. East Asians seem to be aware, in a way that Americans are not, of the strong role that social pressure and social context—as opposed to indelible character traits—play in human decision making. That's interesting enough.

What has really made waves, however, is the discovery that the sensitivity to context carries over into basic information processing. Asian culture seems to train people to take fuller note of the visual environment as well as the social environment. Nisbett and his colleagues have found that when presented with images on computers, Asians recall background and peripheral details far better than Americans.

Nisbett's new work has been called revolutionary. "It challenges the foundations of cognitive science as it has developed for the last twenty-five or thirty years," says Stephen Stich, a philosopher at Rutgers University. "It has never been surprising that people have different cultural beliefs. But the presumption has always been that when you get a bunch of normal subjects, they act the same way at the level of basic perceptual processes. What Dick has been showing is that that is radically wrong. It astonishes people."

Yet some scholars are taken aback not by the work's freshness but by its seemingly old-fashioned, not to say retrograde, implications. They are concerned about what they see as the naïveté with which Nisbett traffics in characterizations of ethnic groups—of whole continents, even. This late in the postcolonial era, is it possible for scholars to speculate about "the Asian mind"?

"The more I do this work, the more I realize the truth in the saying 'It's the West and the rest,'" Nisbett says. To his critics, that stark dichotomy is precisely the problem. Yet Nisbett is gambling his reputation on the conviction that he's onto something huge.

LEAN AND BLUE-EYED, the sixty-year-old Nisbett displays a native ruggedness that decades in academia have not entirely smoothed away. It's not hard to imagine him in El Paso, Texas, where he grew up before heading east to Tufts University and then Columbia. Even in high school, he knew he wanted to be a psychologist. He'd stumbled across a primer on Freud in a local library. "It was like a genetic lock and key," he recalls. "I knew that I was going to do that for the rest of my life."

Like most psychologists, Nisbett began his career studying aspects of human behavior that were presumed to be universal. In his book *Human Inference* (1980), he

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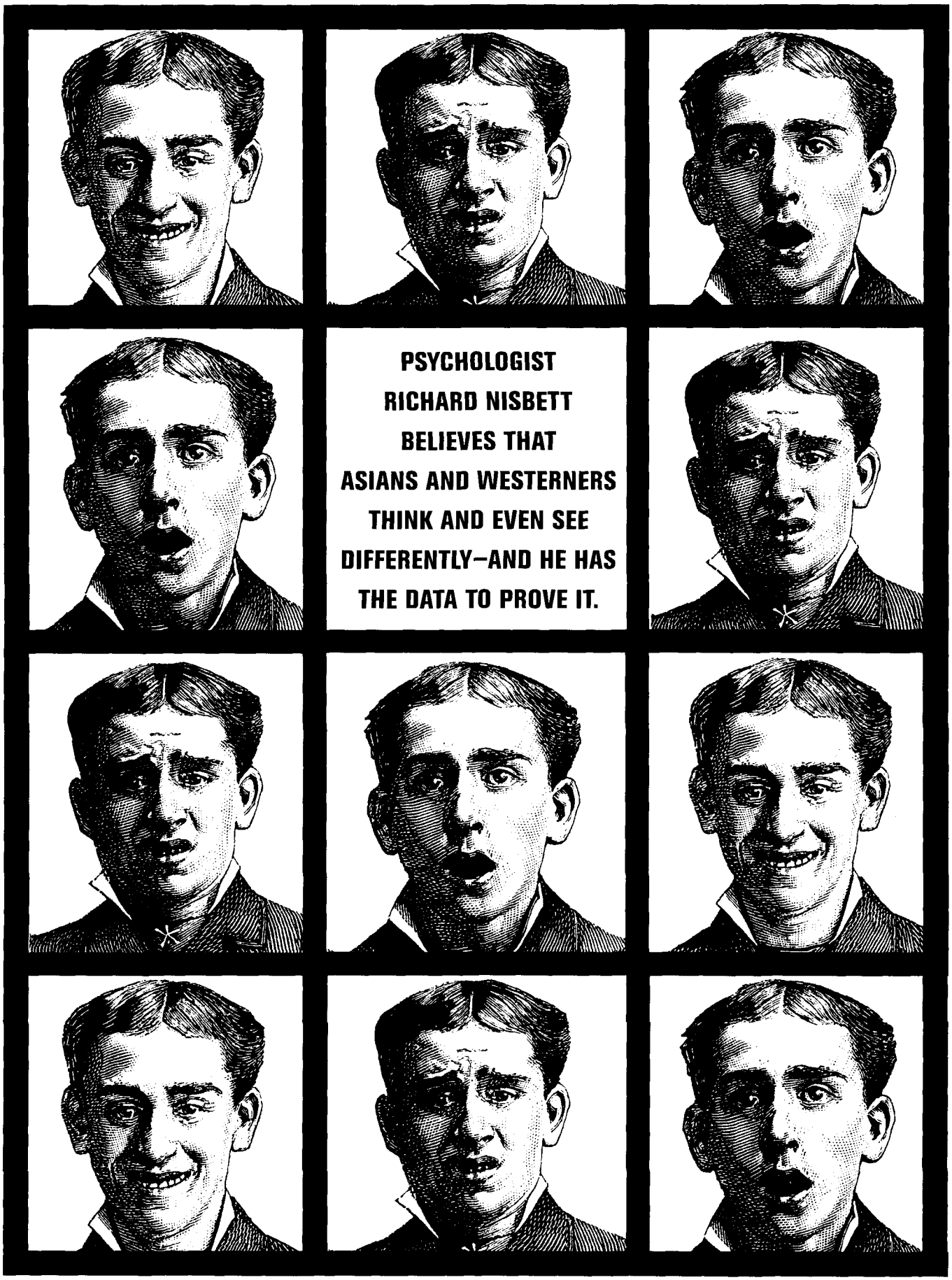

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argued that all people were quite dismal at basic inferential tasks, such as figuring out whether two lines are the same length. And he identified other odd glitches in their thinking: If psychologists laid out four different items of clothing in various sequences and asked subjects to choose the "best" one, subjects would almost always choose the fourth and final item, and they would argue strenuously in favor of their choice: When asked if they thought the order of presentation affected their decision, they would scoff.

Human Inference didn't even allude to cultural variation. But Nisbett confesses that he's long had a latent curiosity about ethnic and gender differences. "Those were not legal interests to have until late in my career," he says. It wasn't until 1982, when he spent a six-week vacation in China, that Nisbett started thinking actively about cultural difference. Perhaps it was in the air: Feminist psychologists were opening the related question of whether women's "ways of knowing" differed from men's. In later years, greater numbers of Asian students started arriving in U.S. psychology departments, bringing with them their own ideas about social psychology. Nisbett credits the "brilliance" of his Asian students with shaping his research at every step. "They have called all of this—right—in advance," he says. In particular, a student from Beijing named Kaiping Peng—now an assistant professor at Berkeley—engaged Nisbett in discussions of universalism and its troubles.

By taking a cultural turn, Nisbett was breaking with long-standing conventions of his discipline. In their normal practice, academic psychologists strip away what they consider the superfluous culture-specific "content" of thought—baseball, hot dogs, sumo, sushi—to get at basic mental "processes" like categorization, inference, and memory (or fundamental personality traits like introversion). To keep culture out of the lab, experimenters have gone so far as to use nonsense syllables in place of words. To be sure, a motley assortment of scholars—a few linguists, anthropologists, and psychologists—have long hungered for an interdisciplinary field that might be called cultural psychology. In the 1920s and 1930s, for example, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf proposed that even the perception of color could be shaped by language and grammar. But the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis attracted harsh scrutiny, and by the 1970s cultural psychology had begun to decline. The scholars who continued the project—people like Michael Cole of the University of California at San Diego and Richard Shweder of the Committee on Human Development at the University of Chicago—tended to work on the fringes of existing disciplines. Shweder's edited volume, *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion* (1984), along with the more recent work emerging from Nisbett's lab, has helped to revive the field.

One of Nisbett's former colleagues at Michigan, Hazel Markus, who is now at Stanford, actually turned to the study of East Asia before he did, publishing a paper in *Psychological Review* in 1991 that has become one of the most widely cited in the history of social psychology. Co-written by Shinobu Kitayama, a psychologist then at the University of Oregon, "Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation" contrasts the American idea of an "independent self" with the Asian concept of an "interdependent self." The difference played out in many ways. Asked to describe themselves, Japanese students referred to their social roles or were merely descriptive: "I am a student" or "I play tennis." Americans referred to intrinsic qualities: "I am friendly" or "I am ambitious." Americans reported feeling joy and anger more deeply and for longer periods than Asians, who considered emotional displays self-indulgent.

For his own debut in cultural psychology, Nisbett tackled an ethnic group he already knew a good deal about: Southern males. In work leading up to *Culture of Honor* (Westview, 1996), co-written by Dov Cohen, a former graduate student, he explored whether Southern men were, as he suspected, especially touchy about the protection of hearth and home. Analyzing gun laws, murder rates, and attitudes toward personal property in states north and south of the Mason-Dixon Line, Nisbett found that Southern states indeed had more than their share of "honor" murders. He backed up the finding with some clever experimentation, recruiting Northern and Southern men to come to the lab for an undisclosed test. As they walked from one room to another, one at a time, he had an assistant bump them and crudely insult them. The Southerners got angrier more quickly, they got flat-out angrier, and they wouldn't back down.

Some of Nisbett and Cohen's explanations of the Southerners' behavior raised eyebrows. Using statistics, the authors claimed to have ruled out such possible causes as climate, slavery's legacy, and poverty. Instead, they largely attributed the Southerners' hypersensitivity to the historical settlement of the region by "Scotch-Irish" herders from the fringes of Britain. Herders, the argument went, usually operated a long way from authorities and thus had to enforce property rights on their own. That kind of broad-brush ethnohistorical theory will sound familiar to those who have read Nisbett's new work on Asia.

NISBETT'S BEST evidence for a cognitive chasm between West and East is summed up in the April 2001 issue of *Psychological Review*. He and his sprawling network of collaborators conducted about thirty separate experiments; together, these experiments were intended to provide hard evidence for what might seem a soft generalization: "East Asians," they write, tend to be "more holistic" and make "relatively little use of categories and formal logic," whereas Westerners are more "analytic, paying attention primarily to the object and the categories to which it belongs and using rules, including formal logic, to understand its behavior." The article is co-written by several former students of Nisbett's: Kaiping Peng, along with Incheol Choi of Seoul National University and Ara Norenzayan of the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris.

The key to Nisbett's recent work is a curious feature of human psychology called, somewhat portentously, the fundamental attribution error. This failing has to do with human resistance to understanding the preeminent role of social context in molding behavior. Social psychologists had been aware of the error for a long time, but it was first named and described in detail in a 1967 article by the Duke psychologists Edward E. Jones and Victor Harris.

It's no secret that human behavior is shaped by social pressure. Nevertheless, people generally believe that when they speak and act, their words and deeds reflect not their immediate circumstances but who

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they are on some deep level. One reason we are stunned by experiments like the famous one conducted by Stanley Milgram at Yale—in which ordinary folks "electrocuted" other ordinary folks after authority figures applied only medium-grade pressure on the subjects—is that we assume law-abiding citizens have strong inner character traits that rule out such behavior. Yet social psychologists have shown that strong character is partly a myth.

If we see a woman give a dollar to a homeless man on her way to work, we affix a label to her: She is "generous." And most people assume that if she comes across another needy person the next day, she will act in the same way. (In experiments, subjects gauge the likelihood at somewhere between 50 and 100 percent.) Actually, there is very little correlation between one case and another—if a woman hands out change one time, there's perhaps a one-in-ten chance she will do so the next. Here's what matters: Does she have extra change in her pocket? Does she have free time? Has someone just done something nice for her? In a thoroughly delightful experiment, it was shown that even a theology student in training for the ministry—someone, for that matter, on his way to deliver a sermon on the Good Samaritan—will blithely step over a person in distress if he is running a few minutes late.

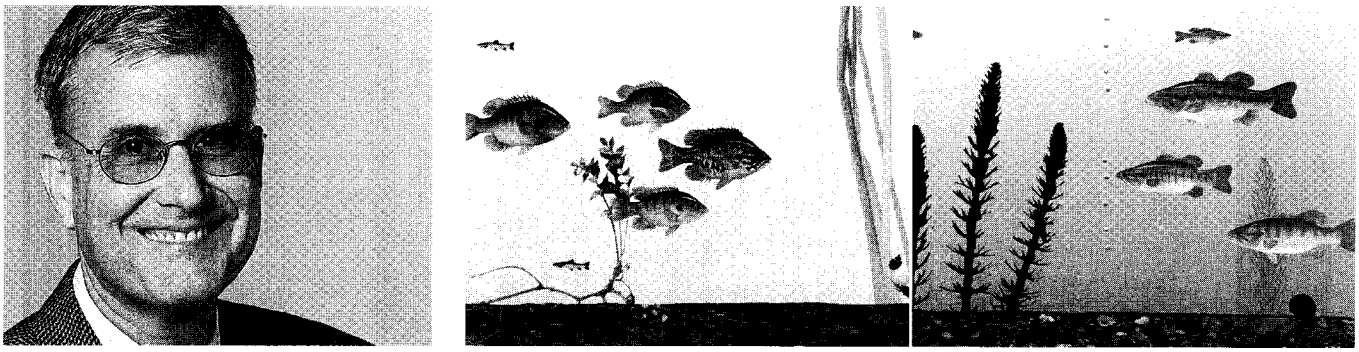
You've just seen examples of how context shapes behavior. But do you believe them? It is incredibly difficult to get people to absorb the importance of contingency. In one experiment, researchers told college students that in a video they were about to watch, a speaker reading an essay endorsing the death penalty had been explicitly assigned to take that position. The students were told it was, quite literally, a command performance. Yet when psychologists asked the students, after the video rolled, if the speech reflected the speaker's own views, the students said yes.

Psychologists then took the experiment a step further, all but rubbing students' noses in the context. They asked the students to write a short speech themselves, taking a preassigned position on the death penalty—irrespective of their own views. Sometimes the psychologists even provided the students with a list of arguments that had to be included. Yet when the students saw someone else, on video, making the *same* arguments that they themselves had just regurgitated on command, they still felt that the speaker really believed what he or she was saying. If you find that odd, you're not alone. "It's really amazing how opaque we are, how dense," Nisbett says.

These findings have been repeated so often that they are staples of social-psychology textbooks, and they've been duplicated using widely varying topics and groups of students. The fundamental attribution error, it was assumed, was indeed fundamental. Nisbett, therefore, was astounded to find that East Asians are less susceptible to it—or rather, that they don't carry it to such near-autistic, Homer Simpson–esque lengths. Asians are just as prone to make the error the first time around. But once they are guided to notice context, they do better. At first, when watching speakers assess the death penalty, they do not identify the speakers' motivations correctly. But when assigned to write their own essays on the death penalty, most of them quickly catch on, correctly identifying why the speakers are saying what they are saying. When they are given specific arguments to use, they are all the more able to grasp the situation.

In psychology lingo, the finding suggests that Asians exhibit greater "attention to the field" than Americans. Nisbett and his collaborators have observed this heightened awareness in many corners of life. Asian newspapers, for example, tend to explain murders through references to social influences ("He was under a lot of pressure"), whereas American papers focus on stable traits ("He was crazy"). In laboratories, Asians and Westerners show similar divergences. When presented with a short piece of detective fiction, Asians identify far more of the passing details in the story as relevant clues. These aren't just differences of taste; often the Asians are right. "East Asian folk psychology," Nisbett and his colleagues write, "may better correspond to the findings and theory of scientific psychology than does American folk psychology."

Even at the most abstract levels of cognition, such as categorization, the two groups of test subjects display significant differences. Perhaps because of their social attunement, Asians appear to be more inter-



RICHARD NISBETT'S "MICHIGAN FISH" EXPERIMENT DEMONSTRATES A POSSIBLE COGNITIVE CHASM BETWEEN CULTURES.

"THE MORE I DO THIS WORK," SAYS NISBETT, "THE MORE I REALIZE THE TRUTH IN THE SAYING 'IT'S THE WEST AND THE REST.'"

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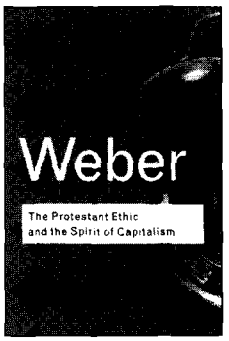

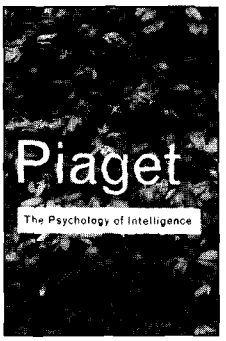

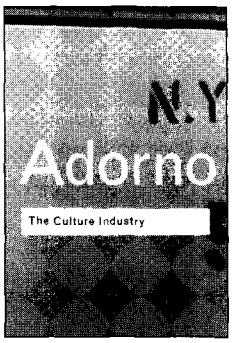

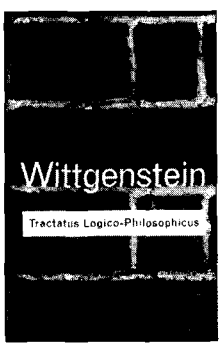

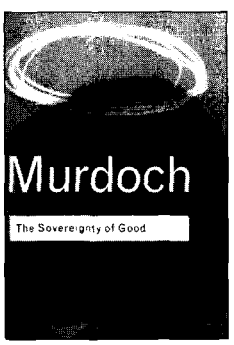

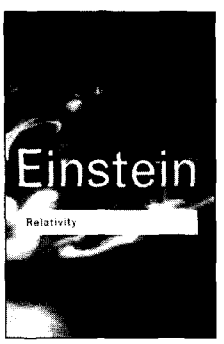

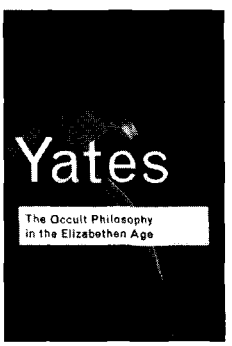

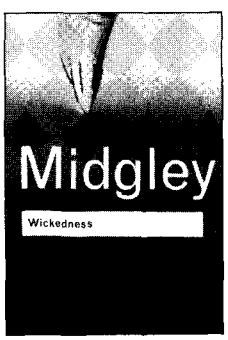

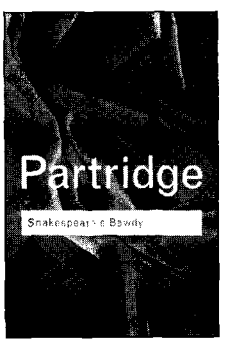

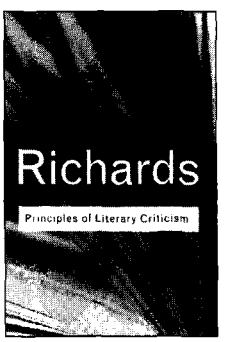

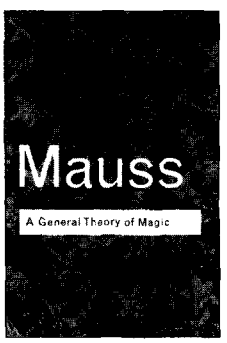

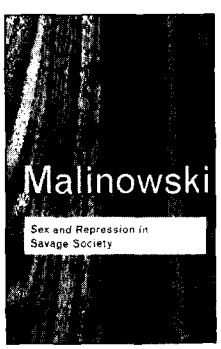

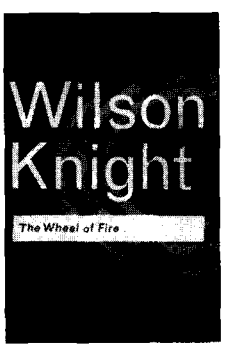

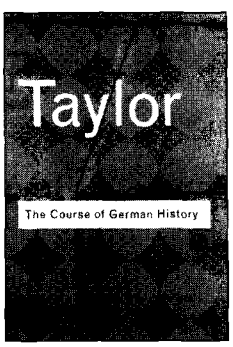

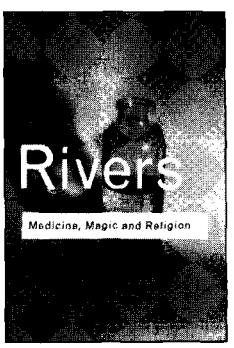

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ested in networks and affiliations than in rigid definitions and categories. When Americans are asked to group together two of the three words "seagull," "sky," and "dog," they choose "seagull, dog," presumably because both fit into the category "animal." Asians choose "seagull, sky," presumably because seagulls can be found in the sky. (In the trio "pen, notebook, magazine," Asians choose "pen, notebook," Americans "notebook, magazine.")

THE MOST BASIC differences, however, and perhaps the most striking ones, have to do with visual perception. Almost everyone finds it bizarre to think of an Easterner and a Westerner looking at the same picture and finding different things there. The most memorable visual-perception experiments involve the now-famous Michigan fish. These studies were written up in *The New York Times* in August 2000 and will soon be reproduced in textbooks. Takahiko Masuda, their graduate-student inventor, used digital animation to create several aquatic scenes. Viewed on a computer monitor, the scenes show several large iridescent fish moving purposefully across the field of view while small fish and other bland water creatures go about their business in the background.

American and Japanese students were asked to watch the scenes for an undisclosed reason. When quizzed later on, they remembered very different things about the scenes. The Japanese made 70 percent more comments about the backgrounds. They made fully twice as many comments about inanimate objects, such as sand, rocks, and shells. The Americans remarked on little except the big "focal fish." "If it ain't moving," Nisbett likes to say when he presents the data, "it doesn't exist for an American."

Nisbett's various tests have been administered to Asian and European-American students in Ann Arbor as well as to students at universities in China, Korea, and Japan. In all of these disparate settings, the findings are consistent—justifying, Nisbett says, talk of "East" and "West." "People have been talking about the differences between Eastern and Western cultures for decades—even using the terms 'analytic' and 'holistic,'" says Susan Andersen, a professor of psychology at New York University and an editor at *Psychological Review*. "It's not as if that notion is brand new by any stretch. What's new is that the evidence is so provocative and clear, and Nisbett is such a superb scientist that he can nail down things that had previously been more on the order of what I would call clinical speculation."

NISBETT'S findings would seem to open a philosophical can of worms, offering ammunition to radical multiculturalists and relativists who argue that there is no standpoint, outside particular cultures, from which truths about the world can be ascertained. Nisbett doesn't think the implications are quite that momentous. "When I first started doing this work, I thought, I'm really dancing with the devil—relativism, anything goes, 'there are no standards.' I don't feel that way anymore. I do feel that there are universals. I just don't know where they are."

Nisbett's attitude is far from belittling toward Eastern cultures. On the contrary, he reflects, "The more familiar I am with Eastern ways of thinking, the more respectful of them I am and the easier it is to criticize Western ways of thinking." In his office, a couple of stray pieces of Asian pottery and a four-inch-tall marble dragon hint at his sympathies. On the tests, however, Nisbett performs like an off-the-charts Westerner.

The recent *Psychological Review* paper avoids one of cultural psychology's most obvious danger zones by refusing to chalk the differences up to biology. Instead, the authors argue that the variation is "traceable to markedly different social systems." And yet, in his search for explanations, Nisbett is not shy about making grand cultural-historical arguments that seem to contrast with his careful laboratory work. Eastern and Western attitudes and cognitive attributes, he believes, can be traced all the way back to ancient Greece and ancient China. Social independence and logical thought have long gone together in the West, he argues; the Greeks were great debaters, flaunting their (individual) wits. China, by contrast, was always characterized by "closely knit collectivity" and had no real tradition of public argument. China's was also an agricultural society, whereas independent-minded herders and fishermen populated Greece.

Today, Nisbett adds, social practices and cognitive styles reinforce each other. Asian kids are taught by their parents that the nail that sticks out gets hammered in, whereas American kids learn that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. Asians practice feng shui, which teaches them to pay attention to the environment; attending to the environment then encourages the development of more practices like feng shui.

These differences may have real-world implications. Paradoxically, because Asians are more aware of social pressure, they may be more resistant to it. Knowing that viewing pornography might push them toward sexual callousness, for instance, they might take steps to avoid such films, whereas Americans, certain that they are too stout of character to be affected, might get blindsided. Nisbett also advances another hypothesis that may be less flattering to Asians. Because Asians know that many factors affect behavior, they tend to be less surprised than Westerners when things go otherwise than they expect. This applies to the physical world, too. This general unsurprisability, combined with a slightly softer attitude toward logic, renders Asians less eager to identify cause and effect. The same qualities that make Asians socially acute may reduce their "epistemic curiosity" about the world. That in turn, Nisbett speculates, may explain why science arose in the West, not the East—despite Asia's rich traditions of art, culture, and practical invention.

IGNORING ROCKS AND SHELLS, THE AMERICANS REMARKED ON LITTLE EXCEPT THE BIG "FOCAL FISH." "IF IT AIN'T MOVING," NISBETT LIKES TO SAY, "IT DOESN'T EXIST FOR AN AMERICAN."

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The Devil's Cloth
A History of Stripes and Striped Fabric
Michel Pastoureau
Translated by Jody Gladding

"Thinking of wearing that pin-striped suit for lunch with the boss? . . . Just be thankful you didn't live a few hundred years ago when a getup like that would not only have blown any chance for a raise but could very well have gotten you killed. . . . It was this unlikely observation that prompted Mr. Pastoureau's book." —Emily Eakin, *The New York Times*

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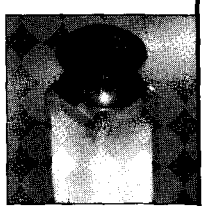
Salt
Pierre Laszlo
Translated by Mary Beth Mader



"In Salt, Laszlo takes something ordinary, looks at it through his dazzling prism of knowledge, and allows the reader to experience its extraordinariness in the process." —Betty Fussell, author of *The Story of Corn*

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ONE MIGHT THINK that Nisbett's work on cultural differences would strike a chord with anthropologists, but for the most part they have given him a cold shoulder. "Psychologists who are doing work on culture and cognition rely on anthropologists," Nisbett says. "But it's very much an unrequited love." Hazel Markus concurs: "Most people in literary criticism, anthropology, and cultural studies just kind of reject psychology as somehow the devil. They make the sign of the cross and turn away." Cultural anthropologists have largely abandoned their previous assumption that a culture can be understood as a unified whole; rather, they stress that cultures are composed of disparate parts that are continually made and remade. One well-known anthropologist, who did not want to be named, wrote in an e-mail to me that Nisbett's research was "déjà vu all over again," alluding to the bad old days when social scientists argued that all Germans were stuck in the anal phase and that the "natives" couldn't think logically.

Even some fellow cognitive psychologists have reservations. John A. Lucy, a member of Chicago's Committee on Human Development who has studied the effects of language on cognition, cautions that Nisbett's categories are too sweeping and broad. "Where I have trouble," he says, "is that he's talking about 'Asia.' When you compare China and Korea and Thailand and Japan, they are really different from a cultural point of view, and even a biological point of view. A lot of anthropologists who work in the area get a little nervous when people talk about 'the Asian mind'—the way you might get nervous hearing someone talking about 'the Aryan mind.'" Especially, he adds, if "Aryan" is supposed to include the Irish, Scandinavians, Poles, and Italians. And the use of ancient concepts like the Tao to map the modern Asian mind also strikes him as "just too big a reach."

Richard Shweder agrees. He suggests that though it's "unjustifiable" for anthropologists to reject the study of cultural difference, "when you start talking about 'East' and 'West' at a very high level of abstraction, you do start bordering on a form of stereotype." Cultural psychologists would be better off reconstructing and analyzing the hopes, fears, and worldviews of real people in concrete circumstances. "To give an account of belief in a society," he says, "you have to give an account of an individual person in the society."

Several anthropologists suggest that Nisbett's results are artifacts of slightly skewed experiments, although these critics haven't examined the protocols closely enough to explain how this might be so. "If there's anything that anthropologists are sensitive to, it is context," says Webb Keane, an associate professor at Michigan. "You don't just generalize from the laboratory situation to all sorts of situations that people find themselves in outside the lab. People enter labs with all sorts of expectations of what to do there."

In response to the charge that he leans on ethnic stereotypes, Nisbett says he is stumped as to how he can discuss the lab findings without invoking Asia, or shared culture, in his papers. "One answer I have is that most of what we do doesn't have anything to do with the stereotypes—and some of our findings overturn them," he adds. "You couldn't derive the fish stuff from stereotypes. The second answer is, Let the chips fall where they may. Asians have a lot of cognitive habits that might benefit us. I'd like to see more things than I do. I'd like to not make some of the logical errors I do. I'd like to be less susceptible to the fundamental attribution error." How easily can we train ourselves to think in another cultural style? Nisbett suspects Asians are at an advantage. "I think they will get our tricks before we get theirs," he says. "Our tricks are easy to get. Rules are easy."

AT TIMES, Nisbett thinks some of his critics are more interested in politics than in science—and he's been there before. In the early 1990s, he gave a talk on the Michigan campus in which he rebutted the idea that blacks have lower I.Q.'s than whites; some faculty and student activists blasted him for the talk, arguing that it was offensive to find such ideas even worthy of discussion. He blames such activists—at Michigan and elsewhere—for squelching honest work on the subject and thus leaving scholars unprepared to counter what he calls the "scurrilous" arguments put forth in *The Bell Curve* a few years later. Partly because there was a scholarly vacuum, he says, the press received *The Bell Curve* with far too little skepticism. "I'm angry at my fellow

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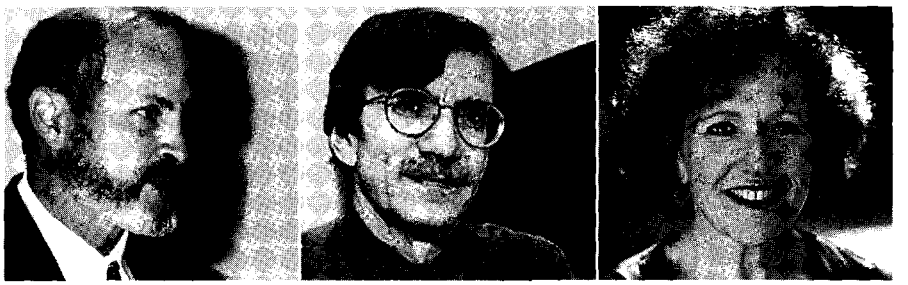


RICHARD SHWEDER AND JOHN LUCY CAUTION AGAINST STEREOTYPING. HAZEL MARKUS PUBLISHED AN EARLY STUDY ON CULTURE AND COGNITION.

ASIA, REMARKS ONE CRITIC, IS ENORMOUS AND VARIED. WHAT IS "THE ASIAN MIND"?

liberals for allowing that to happen," he says. "When anyone accuses me of 'essentializing,' I get some of that anger back.

"Here I'll say one essentializing thing," he adds, breaking into a disarming smile. "Asians need to be warned less about the dangers of essentializing than we do."

According to the new work, after all, it's Americans who put people into categories and attribute significant, unchangeable qualities to them. Asians tend to believe in a more fluid social world. Which raises an interesting question: Is there something prototypically Western about Nisbett's whole project? Is he indulging his American desire to chop the world up into categories and assign fixed essences to the different parts? Are we sure that Asians possess the stable trait of not believing in stable traits? Do Nisbett's findings display Western social science's own fundamental attribution error when dealing with other cultures?

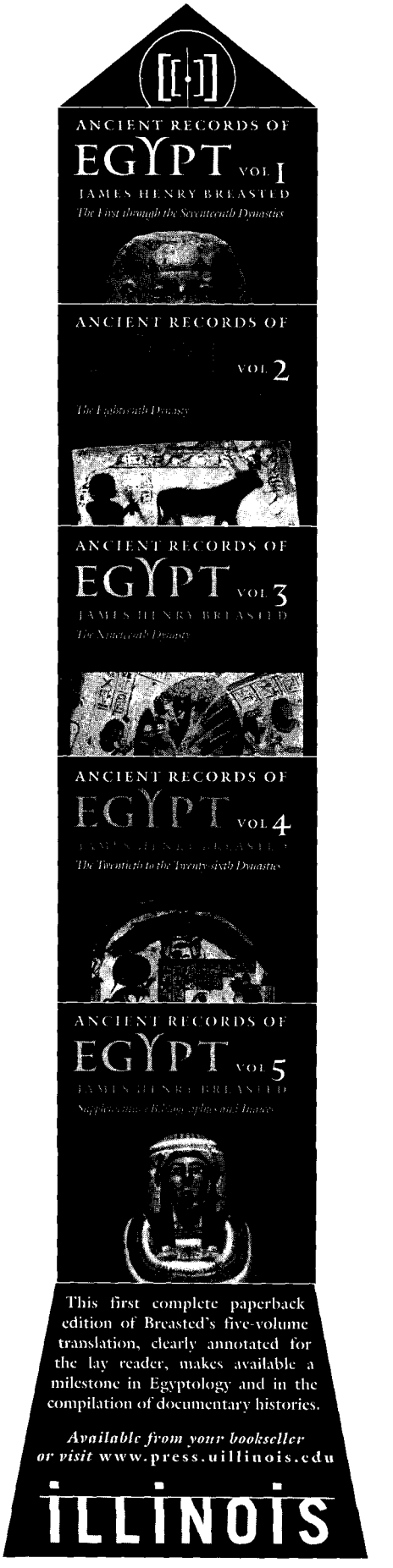
Some anthropologists think so. Nisbett's earlier work, however, is so well regarded that the new findings are getting a respectful look from people in a number of fields. Nisbett has even inspired Stephen Stich, the Rutgers philosopher, to turn to the lab. Using questionnaires, Stich thinks he has detected subtle differences between Asian and Western epistemology—different standards for determining when we "really know" something, as opposed to merely believing it.

The few people exploring the tricky boundary between anthropology and psychology say that Nisbett deserves credit for his courage. "When you are in a tradition that has clear boundaries and clear stands, it's easy to march forward," says John Lucy. "When you are on new turf, it gets hard. You get potshots from left and right. I vigorously disagree with some of Nisbett's work, but I respect him and I hope he succeeds."

Roy D'Andrade, an anthropologist at UC-San Diego, says the real insights in cultural psychology will emerge from the clashes between ethnographers and lab scientists. The lab scientists will be pressed to produce more nuanced arguments, and the ethnographers will be spurred to generate harder, empirically verifiable data. "I think they will argue," he says, "and the grad students will look at both sides and say, 'A plague on both your houses,' and try to find a way around the paradoxes and conundrums of their teachers. If you want to know what the resolution will look like, you'll have to see what the new generation does."

In the meantime, Stich says, it might make sense for scholars to be a little more circumspect about speaking of the ways "human beings" form hypotheses about the world. Psychology is belatedly coming to terms with its universalist fallacies, he says. But philosophers and cognitive scientists are even further behind, peppering their papers with blithe remarks about what "we" intuitively feel, morally, and what proof "we" accept as conclusive. Will they ever change their ways? Perhaps not: After all, as Nisbett's work suggests, our most cherished habits may be more deeply entrenched than we know.

Christopher Shea is a contributing writer to *LF*. His article "A Blacker Shade of Yale: African-American Studies Takes a New Direction" appeared in the March 2001 issue.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GEORGE HERRIMAN CREATED THE COMIC STRIP 'KRAZY KAT.' HIS RACIAL IDENTITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS HAVE BECOME SOURCES OF CONTROVERSY.

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KRAZY KAT'S COLORS

THE SHADINGS OF GEORGE HERRIMAN'S BLACK-AND-WHITE WORLD

BY **JEET HEER**

CARTOON CHARACTERS ARE OFTEN defined by their mysterious origins, secret identities, and colorful costumes. Sometimes these traits can be found in cartoonists no less than superheroes. Consider the case of George Herriman, often described as the greatest American cartoonist, whose celebrated comic strip *Krazy Kat* ran from 1913 until his death in 1944.

Herriman was a rare artist who bridged the gap between high and low culture. His surrealistic strip was admired by popular entertainers like Walt Disney and Frank Capra yet also had a highbrow fan club that included e.e. cummings, Willem de Kooning, and Umberto Eco. Almost uniquely, Herriman combined the aesthetics of modernism with a jazzy American voice: In the polymorphous polyglot world of *Krazy Kat,* the main character has no explicit gender and talks in a mixture of many tongues, including Yiddish, Spanish, French, and Brooklynese.

The sweet oddness of *Krazy Kat* is matched by the biographical mystery surrounding his/her creator. Herriman's ethnicity was a subject of conjecture among his peers for all his adult life. He was variously described as German, French, or Greek. "He looked like a cross between Omar the tent maker and Nervy Nat," wrote fellow cartoonist Tad Dorgan in the early 1920s. "We didn't know what he was, so I named him the Greek." In time, Dorgan's friendly jest hardened into a biographical factoid: Obituaries and reference books often described Herriman as the son of a Greek baker.

Dorgan also noted that Herriman had a trademark costume: He always wore a hat. "Like Chaplin and his cane, George is never without his skimmer," Dorgan wrote. "[Cartoonist Harry] Hirshfield says that he sleeps in it."

In 1971, more than a quarter century after Herriman's death, the sociologist Arthur Asa Berger of San Francisco State University made a discovery that seemed to shed some light on Herriman's cloudy background and his relentless hat wearing. Ordering a copy of Herriman's birth certificate, Berger was surprised to find that the cartoonist had been described as "colored" by the New Orleans Board of Health in 1880. Further research revealed that Herriman's parents were listed as "mulatto" on the 1880 census. More recently, Herriman's biographers report that the cartoonist once confided to a friend that he was a "creole," possibly with "Negro blood," and that he had "kinky" hair. This has led to speculation that he wore his hat in order to hide his hair.

The idea that Herriman was an African-American quickly won acceptance among academic and intellectual fans of *Krazy Kat.* In 1972, Ishmael Reed dedicated his novel *Mumbo Jumbo* to "George Herriman, Afro-American, who created Krazy Kat." Yet others, especially friends of the Herriman family and nonacademic cartoon fans, have remained skeptical of this radical revision of the cartoonist's ethnicity. In 1996, after reading an academic article on *Krazy Kat,* the late Karl Hubenthal, a sports and editorial cartoonist who knew Herriman in the 1930s, wrote, "I never saw any indication in pigmentation, facial structure or speech inflection that indicated anything Negroid about George Herriman."

The views of friends such as Hubenthal might be dismissed as the product of an old-fashioned rigidity on race: the belief that only those with "Negroid" features are African-American. M. Thomas Inge of Randolph-Macon College, who wrote the article that offended Hubenthal, says, "I don't want to call these people racists, but there is clearly something disturbing to them about the notion of Herriman being black."

Yet even Inge, while believing that Herriman had African ancestors, does not think that the cartoonist can accurately be described as an African-American artist. If race, according to the current social-science consensus, is socially constructed, then what are we to do with an artist who seems to have identified all his life with white culture and was thought of as white by his family and friends? Some scholars have searched for a "black aesthetic" within *Krazy Kat.* Others conclude that the cartoonist was just as successful at passing as he was at cartooning; they believe he had no real cultural connection to the African-American experience.

A REVIEW OF THE arguments shows that everything about Herriman and *Krazy Kat* is still being debated. Consider the seemingly clear implications of Herriman's birth certificate being marked "colored." In an e-mail, Bill Blackbeard of the San Francisco Academy

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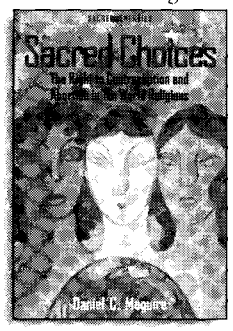

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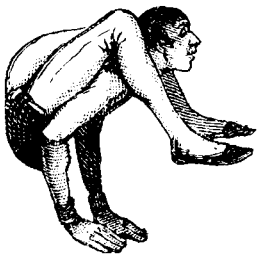

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But even if Blackbeard is right about the term "colored," there is still the fact that the 1880 census listed Herriman's parents as mulatto. "If both parents were mulatto, then how could the son be Greek?" Berger asks gleefully.

What about the hat that Herriman wore so often? In 1996, Karl Hubenthal offered his explanation. "Herriman had a growth on the back of his skull," he wrote. "He referred to it as a 'wen' and was embarrassed to expose it in public." But the cartoon collector Robert Beerbohm, who explains by that he has been "accumulating photos of George Herriman without his hat," thinks otherwise. Beerbohm is convinced that these photos show the waves in Herriman's hair, "which only comes thru a black person's 'kinky' hair all slicked down." In his correspondence, Herriman self-consciously referred to his "kinky" hair.

To outsiders, this debate about hair and hats might seem silly, yet it reveals a fissure in comic-strip studies between fans and academics. Attuned by the contemporary academy to issues of identity, scholars tend to be fascinated by the problem of Herriman's ethnicity. Fans, by contrast, want to win a wider audience and aesthetic respectability for their beloved art form. Amid the welter of biographical disagreement, is there some way to recognize both Herriman's aesthetic achievements and his ambiguous identity, and perhaps to link the two together?

WAS HERRIMAN AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN ARTIST? SOME SAY HE WAS AS SUCCESSFUL AT PASSING AS HE WAS AT CARTOONING.

GEORGE HERRIMAN was born in 1880 in New Orleans, a city where a distinct Creole community known as "free persons of color" had managed to carve out a unique space between black and white. His father seems to have worked as a tailor. In such a setting, as M. Thomas Inge speculates, Herriman might not have been aware initially of his own race. Yet Herriman's childhood also coincided with the rise of Jim Crow, which made the position of New Orleans's "free persons of color" precarious. In this new climate, the mulatto community would have had to choose between being black or white. (Indeed, *Plessy* v. *Ferguson,* the Supreme Court decision enshrining the doctrine of "separate but equal," upheld a Louisiana law enacted during Herriman's youth.)

Around 1886, a decade before the Supreme Court affirmed Jim Crow, the Herriman family moved to California. The Herrimans were neither the first nor the last "mulatto" family who found that simply by changing their address they could become white. In L.A., Herriman's father made for himself a middling existence as a baker and barber, something that might not have been possible in New Orleans.

Herriman became a cartoonist in 1897 and moved to New York three years later. It was an auspicious time: The city was still caught up in its long-running newspaper war between William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. Both Hearst and Pulitzer were eager to employ cartoonists to attract readers. In 1905 Herriman returned to Los Angeles but he came back to New York in 1910.

The newspaper bull pens where Herriman learned his craft were hardly bastions of racial tolerance. They were open to immigrants but not to blacks. As Hubenthal notes, one of Herriman's friends from his early newspaper days was Ralph "Pinky" Springer, "a thoroughly bigoted racist if there ever was one." During the heyday of Jim Crow, white cartoonists almost

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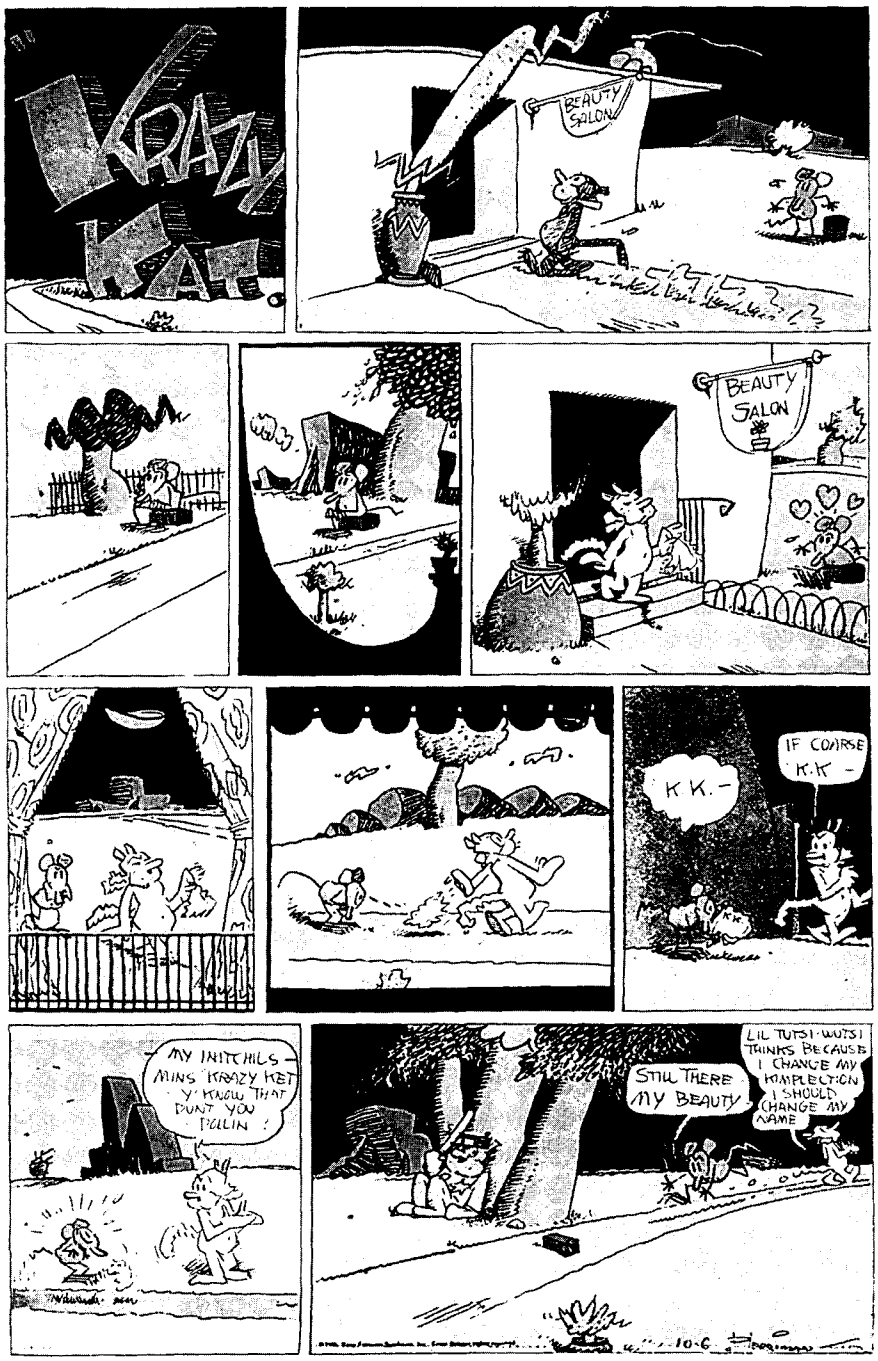
invariably portrayed African Americans as dim-witted, thick lipped, and childlike. Africans were shown to be ooga-booga natives with a strong taste for cannibalism.

Such images can be found in Herriman's work, and they may suggest that he identified himself with white culture. Yet even here, the evidence is ambiguous: In 1902, Herriman created a short-lived strip titled *Musical Mose* about a black man who comically and unsuccessfully "impussanates" white men. "I wish mah color would fade," Mose says at one point. Was Herriman mocking Mose or his own life?

As an artist, Herriman made a considerable leap with the creation of *Krazy Kat* as a free-standing strip in 1913. Unlike the broad slapstick humor of *Musical Mose* and other early Herriman strips, *Krazy Kat* was gentle, fey, and whimsical. At the center of the strip is an interspecies love triangle: Krazy, the black cat, loves Ignatz, the white mouse; Ignatz, however, hates Krazy and takes delight in bopping him/her with a brick. Krazy, with a charming naïveté, interprets these bricks as symbols of love. Officer Bull Pupp, the white police dog who is secretly in love with Krazy, has a clearer view of the matter and tries to jail Ignatz. Krazy remains unmoved by Pupp's affections while enjoying the way "like lil innisint childrens they [Ignatz and Pupp] play togeda."

For the most part, cartooning is a conservative art form. Popular strips such as *Peanuts, Blondie*, and *Dilbert* all deal in the stoic comedy of defeat and resignation. *Krazy Kat*, by contrast, takes place in an exultantly absurdist universe where sorrows become joy. In its topsy-turvy world, everyone wins when the formula is enacted: Ignatz enjoys the thrill of brick throwing, Krazy the pleasure of being bricked, and Officer Pupp the satisfaction of jailing the mouse. Of course, the dog and the mouse have to suffer each other's existence, so the greatest happiness is reserved for the cat. As the critic Robert Warshow once noted, "It is a very nice universe for Krazy ...he loves to be hit by the brick; but he respects Offissa Pupp's motives."

As a work of popular art, *Krazy Kat* had a curious fate. At first, it was extremely popular, but before long it grew too esoteric for the comic-strip-reading audience. By the time *Krazy Kat* lost its mass readership, however, it had won a place in the heart of one important fan, William Randolph Hearst, who declared that Herriman would be paid for the strip as long as he wanted to continue working on it.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AS A MODERNIST ARTIST OF SORTS, HERRIMAN OFTEN MADE USE OF THE FACT THAT HIS CHARACTERS WERE MERELY BLACK INK ON WHITE PAPER.

WITH ITS highbrow admirers, *Krazy Kat* has attracted numerous ingenious interpretations over the years, many of which are avowedly allegorical. For the poet e.e. cummings, the strip was about how democracy (Krazy) existed as a balancing act between individualism (Ignatz) and society (Officer Pupp). The radical critic Franklin Rosemont finds in *Krazy Kat* the proletarian militancy of the Industrial Workers of the World: The black cat, after all, was the Wobbly symbol for industrial sabotage. More pastorally, the *New Yorker* writer Adam Gopnik sees Herriman's universe as a vision of an

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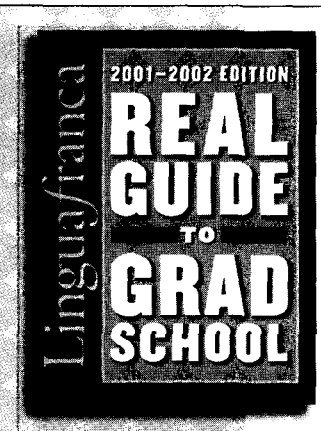

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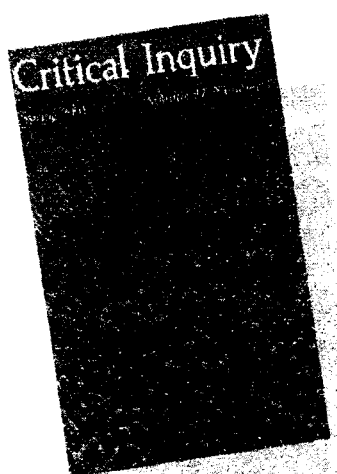

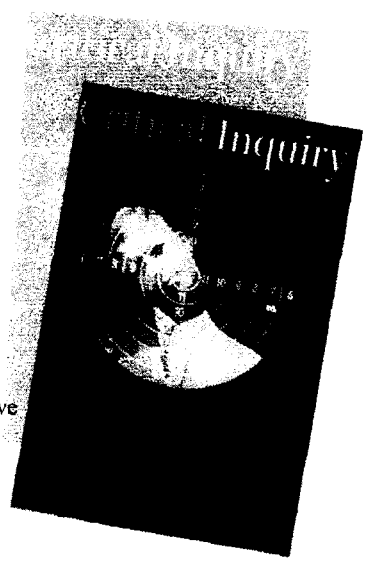

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uncorrupted Eden: The bi-gendered Krazy is both Adam and Eve, Ignatz is the serpent, and Officer Pupp is the archangel Michael. In a more secular vein, the philosopher David Carrier describes *Krazy Kat* as a work of art telling us what life would be like outside of history. "Whatever happens in this universe is preordained—nothing new can happen. History is not over so much as not yet started."

One of the most frequently used words to describe *Krazy Kat* is "playful." And for some critics at least, it is here that questions of race are relevant. In his book *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890–1945* (Smithsonian), Ian Lewis Gordon of the National University of Singapore argues that the elastic universe of *Krazy Kat* can be linked to Herriman's life as a mixed-race person living in a world where people were forced to be either black or white. At the turn of the century, Gordon says, "the complexities and diversities of society and culture in places such as New Orleans were reduced to black or white.... On the other hand, strips like *Krazy Kat* offered something different. The whole funny animal comics tradition could be seen as an effort to retain some sense of play in identity."

Bill Blackbeard suggests that as Herriman traveled amid intellectuals and artists in the early 1920s, his attitudes toward race might have changed. In contrast to his colleagues in the deeply segregated newsrooms where he drew his strip, his new friends moved in a more relaxed atmosphere. One of those friends was Gilbert Seldes, a pioneering critic of popular culture who praised *Krazy Kat* as "the most amusing and fantastic and satisfactory work of art produced in America today." Seldes took a missionary delight in sharing *Krazy Kat* with such acquaintances as Edmund Wilson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and James Joyce. (*Finnegans Wake,* which is filled with references to comic strips like *Mutt and Jeff,* might have been influenced by *Krazy Kat*'s verbal antics and dream universe.) Seldes was also an early white patron of black popular culture, especially jazz and theater. Perhaps for the first time in his adult life, Herriman encountered an integrated cultural environment where African-American art was respected.

THROUGHOUT HIS *Krazy Kat* work, Herriman made use of racial themes and subthemes. In one early strip, Krazy and Ignatz argue about the implications of evolutionary theory. Krazy is taken with Charles Darwin's idea "that we all sprang from the same source." Ignatz rejects this idea and prefers the "polygenetic theory" favored by virulent racists of the time. In Ignatz's view, "you kats were always kats and we mouses always mouses."

In later strips, the racial implications become more plain: Krazy is not just a cat with black fur but also, in a profound way, an African-American cat. Krazy is revealed to have an uncle named Tom who picks cotton and sings the blues. "The suger kanes is sweetening, / The melons shore is red— / The yams all set for eatening— / Roll me up in a foldin' bed—," Uncle Tom sings. (Uncle Tom is only one of many Herriman allusions to Harriet Beecher Stowe's antislavery novel.) In an essay published last year in the literary journal *Mosaic,* Eyal Amiran of Michigan State University argues that the presence of characters like Uncle Tom is evidence of Herriman's obsession with genealogy and kinship.

Amiran further notes that Herriman's racial concerns in *Krazy Kat* were connected to his formalist experiments with the nature of cartooning. The division between black and white is embedded not only in American social life but also in the very fabric of cartooning: Herriman often had fun with the inescapable fact that his characters were merely black ink on white paper (until its last decade, *Krazy Kat* was almost always printed in black and white, even on Sundays).

In his/her earliest incarnation, Krazy Kat was little more than a smudge, looking almost like a bug squashed on the page. In later strips, Krazy and the other characters often switch between black and white with delightful abandon. In a 1931 strip, an art critic visits Coconino County (home of Herriman's imaginary animal kingdom) and describes Krazy and Ignatz

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as "a study in black & white." Krazy catches his meaning ("He means us—me bleck. You white") and suggests to Ignatz that they "fool him. You be bleck and I'll be white." Ignatz agrees, and in the next panel Krazy is white and Ignatz is black. The art critic gets the last laugh, though, by describing the transfigured cat and mouse as "another study in black & white." Even when the roles of black and white are reversed, it seems that the division itself remains; in the comics page no less than in social life, the opposition between black and white can be redefined but not abolished.

Herriman's color play also shapes the strip's love triangle, which can be seen as a comically thwarted fantasy of miscegenation. In a 1935 strip, Krazy goes to a beauty salon and comes out all white. Ignatz immediately falls in love with this pale cat. But Ignatz's ardor dims when a dropped handkerchief reveals that the cat's initials are K.K. Then Ignatz reaches again for the brick. As Krazy reflects: "Lil Tutsi-Wutsi thinks because I change my kimplection I should change my name." Like Krazy, George Herriman didn't change his name but somehow changed his complexion. Born "colored" in 1880, he was listed as "Caucasian" on his death certificate in 1944.

Despite all the biographical bickering attending Herriman's life, a few statements may be hazarded. He had African-American ancestors and was aware of this fact. As an adult, he adopted different strategies to deal with what his society taught him was an embarrassing ancestry. At times he hid his background and adopted the contempt his white friends had for black people. Through his art, however, he tried to grapple with issues of identity and create a playful utopia where different cultures could meet on equal ground.

In the 1920s, George Herriman returned to California with his wife and two daughters. He wanted to be near the rugged landscape of Arizona and the culture of the Navajo Indians. He incorporated elements of both into his already multicultural strip and told Gilbert Seldes that he wanted to be reincarnated as an Indian. Once again he dreamed of escaping the world of black and white.

Jeet Heer, a Toronto-based writer, is a frequent contributor to the *National Post* and co-editor of *Left History*. His article "Marxist Literary Critics Are Following Me!" appeared in the May/June issue of *LF*.

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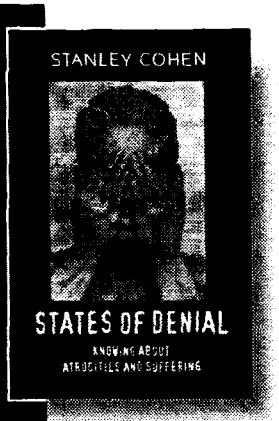

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THE ENGLISH INSTITUTE, 2001

CAMBRIDGE, MA: SEPTEMBER 21–23, 2001

The 60th meeting of the English Institute will explore new work under four headings: a topic, a genre, an author, and a text for group discussion. The topic panel, Bohemias, will inquire into the uneasy and UNCERTAIN RELATION THESE SITES OF ARTISTIC, SOCIAL, AND SEXUAL EXPERIMENTATION BEAR TO THE DOMINANT CULTURES from which they set themselves apart. We will consider the problematic genre of Romance, which has been powerfully theorized and historically embedded, while recent studies of late Greek and Roman antiquity have prompted broad reconsideration of the "genre" from its inception through subsequent cultural history. The author panel will revisit Walt Whitman, for whose early career the bohemian subcultures of New York City were of decisive importance. A discussion will follow of Kristeva's "A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident," which is a 1974 manifesto for the responsibilities of intellectuals written at the moment that poststructuralism, Maoism, psychoanalysis, and feminism were swirling together in Paris's literary political vanguard. For more information, please contact Betsy Brown,The English Institute, Harvard University, 12 Quincy Street, Cambridge, MA 02138; e-mail: englinst@fas.harvard.edu; Web: http://www.englishinstitute.org

LOST AND FOUND: THE ART OF TRANSLATION

IOWA CITY, IA; OCTOBER 12, 13, & 14, 2001

Announcing the second annual International Writing Program Festival, a conference and CELEBRATION OF THE ART OF TRANSLATION. Keynote speaker: W. S. Merwin. Participants include: Aaron Asher, Linda Asher, Clare Cavanagh, Bei Dao, William Gass, Edmund Keely, Goeran Malmqvist, John Mathias, Heather McHugh, John Nathan, Nikolai Popov, Francine Prose, Zvonamir Radeljkovic, Ellen Dore Watson, Eliot Weinberger, Daniel Weissbort. For more information, contact Susan Benner, at E-MAIL: SUSAN-BENNER@UIOWA.EDU, or the International Writing Program, TELEPHONE (319) 335-0128

THE VULNERABLE CITIZEN: SURVEILLANCE AND PRIVACY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

CHICAGO, IL: OCTOBER 19-20, 2001

This conference focuses on perceptions of vulnerability in everyday life. Speakers will explore the paradoxical role of the state as regulator and guardian; TECHNOLOGIES OF SURVEILLANCE, INCLUDING MEDICAL, RACIAL, CONSUMER, AND CRIMINAL PROFILING; and the strategic use of space to regulate movement, time and desire. Plenary speakers: Wendy Kaminer, Randall Kennedy, Richard Sennett. Panelists include Douglas Baynton, Lennard Davis, Frances Dolan, Susan Fainstein, Dennis Judd, Stephen Katz, Evan McKenzie, Sonya Michel, Lynn Paltrow, Michael Sherry, and David Stovall. The conference will take place at the University of Illinois at Chicago and is sponsored by the Institute for the Humanities, Medical Humanities Program, Chicago Seminar, and Gender and Women's Studies Program. For further information contact Linda Vavra, assistant director, Institute for the Humanities, 701 S. Morgan Avenue, MC 206, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL 60607-7040; TELEPHONE: (312)996-6354; E-MAIL: LVAVRA@UIC.EDU WEB: http://www.uic.edu/depts/huminst/Conferences.html

THE FUTURE OF CULTURAL MEMORY

COLUMBIA, SC: FEBRUARY 14–17, 2002

The Program in Comparative Literature at the University of South Carolina announces a conference, "The Future of Cultural Memory." This conference will address issues at the INTERSECTION OF CULTURAL/LITERARY STUDY, POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY, AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS. Possible topics include: the politics of history and memory, transitions to and from democracy, the public sphere, culture of/and globalization, Third World feminism, postcolonial legacies, narrative and identity, literature/culture and practical reason, cosmopolitanism, culture and citizenship. Plenary speakers include: Alessandro Ferrara (Parma, Italy), Linda Alcoff (Syracuse), and Pascal Michon (College International de Philosophie, Paris). Send inquiries and one-page abstracts for twenty-minute papers by September 1, 2001 to Meili Steele, Comparative Literature, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208 TELEPHONE: (803) 777-0473; E-MAIL: STEELEM@SC.EDU. Selected papers will be published in *Intertexts*. Completed papers are due on October 1, 2001.

CALIBRATIONS: SIZING UP SPACES, COMMUNITIES, AND SELVES

COLLEGE STATION, TX: APRIL 4–7, 2002

The Center for Humanities Research at Texas A&M University invites paper abstracts (500 words) for its eighth biennial interdisciplinary conference. "Calibrations" explores how the nature and scale of human communities and identities have shaped the arts, history, literature and language, philosophy, political and social thought, and cultural and social formations. HOW DO SPACES BECOME CONFIGURED INTO COMMUNITIES? How do subjects navigate communities locally, regionally, nationally, globally to form and transform identities? Such questions will be addressed by panels and by plenary and featured speakers, including Trinh T. Minh-Ha, Rosi Braidotti, Walter Benn Michaels, R. Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, Michael Awkward, Charles Curran, Jorge Gracia, V. Spike Peterson, and Marcus Rediker. Submissions due: October 15, 2001. Contact: Conference Committee, Center for Humanities Research, Texas A&M University, 4352 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-4352 TELEPHONE: (979) 845-8328 WEB: http:/www.tamu.edu/chr

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GOOD VIBRATIONS

THE SCIENCE OF SENSORY CONFUSION

QUESTION: WHAT DO VLADIMIR Nabokov, Richard Feynman, Olivier Messiaen, Wassily Kandinsky, and Nikola Tesla have in common? Answer: They all were, or at least claimed to be, *synesthetes.* Each of them, in other words, experienced sensory crossovers. Nabokov had "colored hearing"; the sounds associated with letters of the alphabet evoked for him specific hues (the *b* sound, he wrote in *Speak, Memory,* was "burnt sienna," whereas *s* was "a curious mixture of azure and mother-of-pearl"). Tesla, a pioneer in the field of electricity, could discern the flavor of certain sights; looking at small squares of paper in a dish of liquid would fill his mouth with a horrible taste. And so on.

Synesthesia, a recognized phenomenon for the last three hundred years or so, enjoyed a special vogue in the late nineteenth century among spiritualistically inclined artists. Today about one person in two thousand is gifted—or cursed—with sensory crossover; that, at any rate, is the usual estimate in the scientific literature. About twenty forms of synesthesia have been reported. The most common of these involve various written letters or numbers triggering colors, which are either seen in the mind's eye or projected outside the body (usually within arm's reach). In rarer cases, synesthetes say they can see the fragrance of a flower, or taste the note of a trumpet, or even hear the decor of the room they are in. One synesthete reported that the sensation of pain she felt when she tore a ligament in her leg turned the whole world orange.

It is tempting to dismiss all this as the product of overvivid imaginations. "The confessions of a synesthete must sound tedious and pretentious to those who are protected from such leakings," Nabokov observed. Which of us, after all, has not tasted "sharp" cheese or seen a "loud" color or felt "bitter" cold? Perhaps, one might think, synesthetes just need a little ironic distance from their metaphors.

When it comes to deciding whether synesthesia is for real, traditional philosophy isn't a great deal of help. It is conceptually impossible for the synesthete to be mistaken about the subjective experiences he reports, since they are directly present to consciousness. If I sincerely declare that I see blue when I taste beef, then from a philosophical point of view I am as infallible as the pope.

For synesthesia to be scientifically interesting, it would have to have some measurable consequences. And it turns out that it does. To begin with, people who report synesthetic experiences tend to be remarkably consistent over time. In one 1993 study, synesthetes were 92 percent consistent in linking particular colors to sounds after a full year, whereas non-synesthetes, when asked to come up with such color associations, could manage only 37 percent consistency after a mere week. Synesthesia also seems to have an effect on normal perception, sometimes actually improving perceptual performance. In one recently published study, those synesthetes for whom numbers triggered colors were instantly able to detect patterns in a black-and-white chart of numerals, patterns that became apparent to non-synesthetes only after several seconds of looking. The most concrete evidence for the reality of synesthesia, however, comes from brain-scanning technologies. Images of the brains of synesthetes who report colored hearing, for example, show increased activation of color-processing areas of the cortex in response to sound.

Do synesthetes, then, have crossed wires inside their skulls? Some researchers think so. One hypothesis, advanced by the University of Cambridge psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen, is that synesthesia arises from an overabundance of neural connections in the brain. It is possible that at birth we all experience the world synesthetically with a single undifferentiated sense: Infants less than a year old, for example, show a very similar neural response to a bright light and a loud sound. But as the brain develops with age, many neural connections get pruned away, and the senses begin to operate independently of one another. In synesthetes, the idea goes, this pruning process does not get carried out completely, possibly for genetic reasons (synesthesia is known to run in families).

Appealing as this hypothesis may seem, there is one interesting datum with which it does not square: the fact that certain psychedelic drugs can induce temporary synesthesia. It is hard to believe that a hit of LSD could cause new neural connections to sprout and then vanish within the space of a few hours. Maybe synesthetes have the same brain architecture as non-synesthetes, but it just functions differently. Peter Grossenbacher, a scientist at the National Institute of Mental Health, thinks synesthesia has something to do with the interface between sensation and perception. Normally, the brain keeps the right sort of sensory signals on the right sensory-processing channels. Auditory information, for example, is inhibited from flowing along the channel to the visual center. But in synesthetic brains, Grossenbacher conjectures, this inhibition somehow breaks down, allowing the different senses to get jumbled.

Whatever its underlying mechanism, synesthesia seems to make reality a tad more interesting, sort of like an everyday fantasia. Some synesthetes say that giving it up would be like seeing the world in black and white. As for us normal, sense-segregated types, we must take our Nabokovian experiences where we can find them. When a secretary places me on hold, I have noticed, certain kinds of piped-in music cause me to see red and feel a headache.

JIM HOLT

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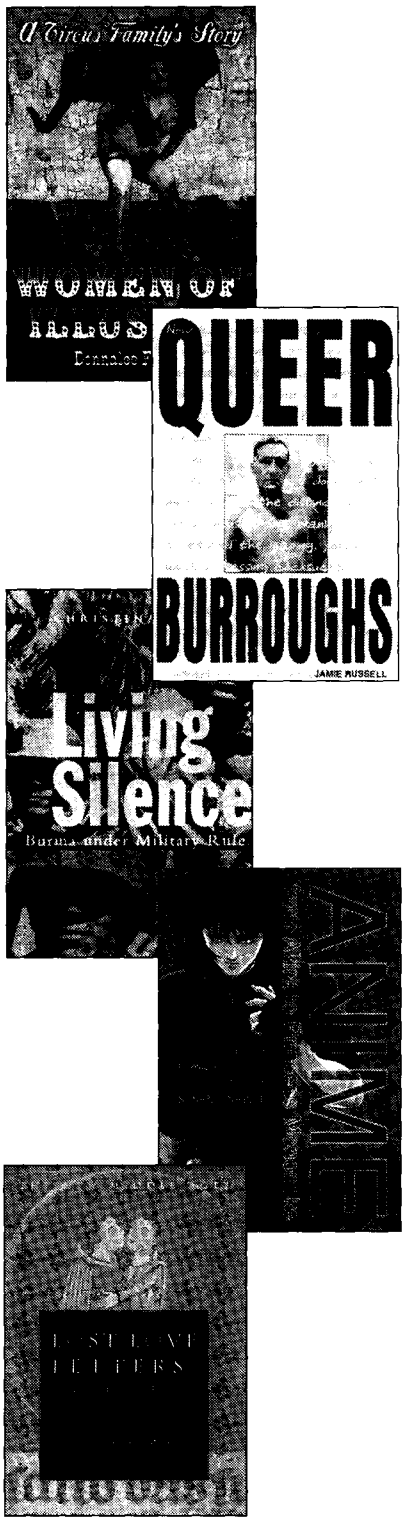

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